NF

ISSUE #67: SIDESCROLLING SHOWDOWN

BREAKING THE **SONIC CYCLE**

NEW NO MORE

DOUBLE DRAGON DOUBLE INTERVIEW

PRINCE OF PERSIA: THE LOST CROWN

PIKMIN 4

SONIC ORIGINS PLUS

GRAVITY CIRCUIT

A TRIP TO THE **NATIONAL VIDEOGAME MUSEUM**

SONIC SUPERSTARS™ VS. SUPER MARIO BROS.™ WONDER

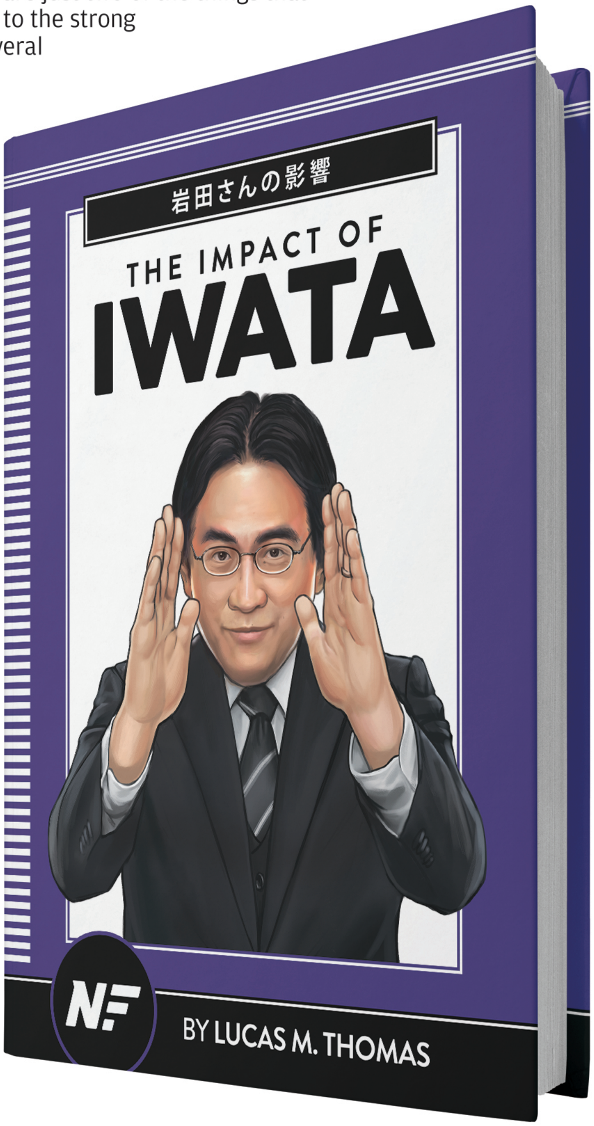
PREORDERS AVAILABLE!

THE KICKSTARTER CAMPAIGN for our first-ever book officially came to an end on July 13, and the final funding total was $127,130! Nearly 2,600 different backers jumped in to support the project and get their personal copies of The Impact of Iwata officially preordered. And now you can join them!

If you missed the Kickstarter, we've now opened a preorder page for the book in partnership with BackerKit. There, you can order your own copy and still lock in some free bonus items, like the newly revised double-sided wall poster and the audiobook version! Those are just two of the things that are becoming a reality in addition to the book itself, thanks to the strong showing of support during the Kickstarter that let us hit several different Stretch Goals. So an extra thanks to all of you who were able to pledge while the campaign was still active! The book's being made better as a result!

If you *didn't* miss the Kickstarter and already made a pledge, this same BackerKit site will also be taking care of pledge management – so you can confirm your shipping address, add on extra items like more copies of the book or a bookmark or an 'obi' jacket, answer survey questions and more. You should have received a notification in your email telling you to fill out your survey and complete your order! If you didn't get that, reach out to me via direct messages on the Kickstarter Impact of Iwata campaign page, or email lucasmthomas@nintendoforcemagazine.com. But please be patient while waiting for a response! I'll do my best to get back to everyone in a timely manner, but like I said, we've already got 2,600 book orders to manage with just the Kickstarter alone!

Thanks again for all of your continued support, NF fans. And keep on telling your friends about our new book! I know the Kickstarter site isn't everyone's favorite, so some people who were interested in getting a copy may have held back just due to it only being available there. BackerKit's a separate thing, and they also accept PayPal, which Kickstarter didn't. So jump in now if that's your preference! – **LUCAS**



Preorders will only be available until the book begins to ship starting this December!

TheImpactOfIwata.BackerKit.com/hosted_preorders

ISSUE #67: SIDESCROLLING SHOWDOWN

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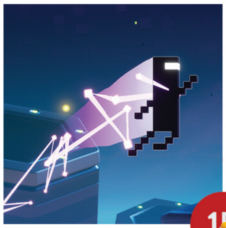
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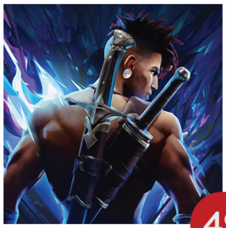
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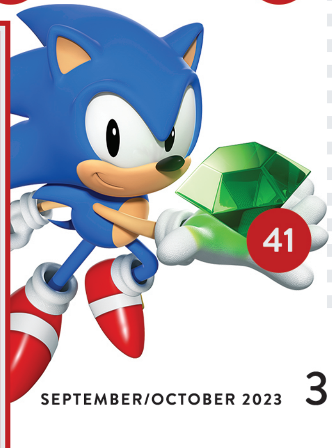
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ON THE COVER

It's a custom-commissioned crossover collision! Characters from both the Sonic and Mario franchises are racing against one another, running to the right as fast as they can in celebration of the sidescrolling style of platformers that spawned both of their series — and in recognition of the fact that both of the series are revisiting those roots soon, through Sonic Superstars and Super Mario Bros. Wonder! This artwork was made by the talented 3D render artist uJidow (**@ujiidow**), who also did custom Sonic art for Page 28!

SEPTEMBER/ OCTOBER 2023

INBOX

2D, OR NOT 2D?

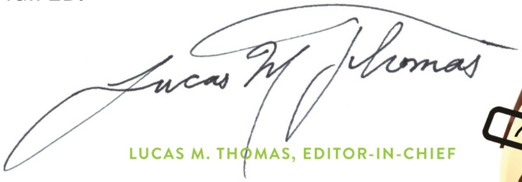
That is the question.

It's been over 30 years now since Nintendo began to transition away from two-dimensional game worlds and started to put more of a spotlight on 3D environments instead. (I look at the original Star Fox, released in 1993, as the game that began that movement.) For a while there – especially in the back half of the '90s during the age of the N64 – 2D gaming was really looked at as "behind the times." 3D was the wave of the future! Why would anyone still want to play the old style of games?

Sidescrollers suffered most severely. I still recall when Castlevania: Symphony of the Night went on sale in late 1997, and the collective response from gamers was pointing and laughing at it, since it dared to still be a 2D sidescroller! Haughty N64 fans turned their noses up at it, confident that the 3D Castlevania sequel that was due to be launched soon after would be far superior. (It wasn't.)

Enough time has passed now, though, that the early years of pure anti-2D negativity have faded away, and the game industry now fully embraces both sidescrolling adventures and look-anywhere 3D camera quests as well . . . for the most part. The shadow of that late '90s era does still linger in gamers' general assessment of the value of 2D titles when compared to 3D ones – people will play them, but probably not without a complaint or two about how they shouldn't be sold for "full price" if they're only going to offer two dimensions' worth of game worlds to explore.

Well, I for one think 2D sidescrollers are more than worthy of a full investment of both cash and time, and I'm thrilled that two major new releases will be shoring up that argument soon! Both Sonic and Mario – the titans who carried the industry in the years before the 3D transition began – are bringing us back in time to pre-1993 2D worlds of wonder. This issue of NF highlights both of their new efforts, along with several other sidescrollers that we think also deserve your support! So please enjoy this magazine – with each page prepared in full 2D.



LUCAS M. THOMAS, EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

ISSUE #66:
JULY/AUGUST 2023

Our Pikmin-led Issue #66 was another success, judging by the many positive comments we've received regarding its content – and its set of Pikmin bookmarks! I've been happy to hear that those are already getting use, as our readers continue their reading beyond the bounds of our magazine, with books of their choice! May they serve you well for a long while!

You know what's next: a recap of the Player's Poll questions we asked you all to answer for this issue. First up, we wanted to know if you'd tried the Sonic the Hedgehog series before, and if so, which Sonic game was your first. Next, we put the 2D vs. 3D battle straight to you, asking which of the two styles you personally prefer. And finally, we endeavored to tap into your creativity once again, asking you to dream up a brand-new animal friend for Sonic. Here's what you said:

LETTERS

I am a fan of the Sonic franchise! I actually think the original Sonic the Hedgehog was the first video game I ever played in general (let alone my first Sonic game)! Everytime I hear the Green Hill Zone theme song, I get flash-backs to the good ol' times – so good, in fact, I even bought a used Sega Genesis in my teens to continue playing (which I still have, now in my twenties, and love dearly).

For me, 2D is the home run! I have played some of the 3D Sonic games and they are great, but it's hard to beat the classics.

I think a good new animal friend for Sonic would be a porcupine named Quill – he would be studious, have glasses and be kind of a smartypants (but in a caring way). **– EMILY EARL**

I'm a big Sonic fan. My first Sonic game was Sonic and the Secret Rings. I really like motion control, plus it has a great story.

Sonic is best in 3D, although I did enjoy Sonic Rush Adventure.

Sonic's new friend would be a light green fox named Dash. He is Tails' apprentice, and he has a fake Chaos Emerald that allows him to do a weaker Chaos Control. **– STELLA**

Although I love the 2D games, seeing Sonic return to his Adventure roots gets me the most excited. So 3D.

As for an animal buddy, I'm not terribly creative, but a capybara would be cool! Her name would be Chills, due to how relaxed capybaras always look.
– DAVID O'BRIEN

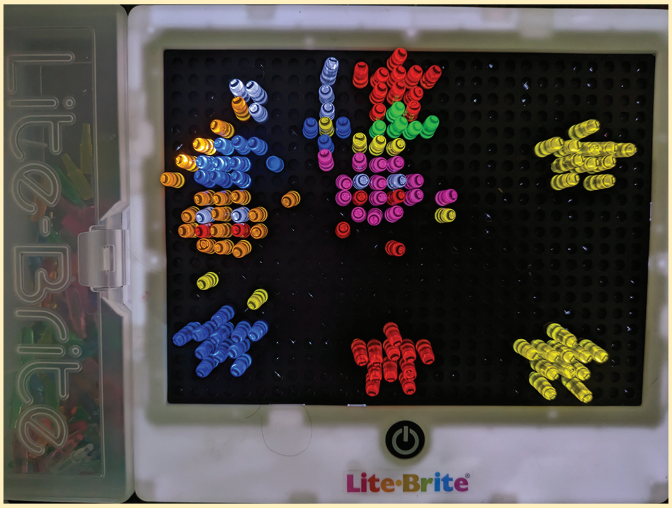
The first Sonic game I played was Sonic Advance. For Sonic specifically, I'd say I prefer 3D. For games in general, I'm not sure. And an otter would be cool, so how about Ozzy the Otter? **– JULIO CABRERA**

Yes, I am a fan of the Sonic franchise. The first Sonic game I ever played was Sonic 2 on the Sega Genesis.

I get most excited with 3D games, they make you feel as if you're actually in the game!

If I was tasked with making a new animal friend to pal around with Sonic, I would team him up with Kandy the Sugar Glider! **– JOSE DIAZ**

Heyo! I am just reading your magazine right now! I haven't been a HUGE fan of the Blue Blur's adventures. As for #2, I don't really care! 3D and 2D are both good! Now finally, Question #3. I would make a walrus. That hasn't been done before! **– ADEN O.**
You sure about that, Aden? (His name is Rotor.)



LITE-BRITE, WHAT A SIGHT!

Question 1: Yes, I love Sonic. My first game was Sonic Frontiers on the Switch. Question 2: 3D, because it would be hard to play games like Minecraft in 2D. Walking around a tree would be a challenge! Question 3: I think I would have a turtle named Speedy, who actually isn't fast, but can slow time down, so he seems fast. He uses his shell to protect his friends like a force field.

Attached is some artwork I did on my Lite-Brite of Kirby for you to enjoy! **— YOUR FAN, DEWEY, 9 YEARS OLD (AND DAD, DUANE)**

Thanks for sending in this artwork, Dewey! We've for sure never had a Lite-Brite submission before. Great idea! I also love your concept for Speedy the Turtle. Giving Sonic a new fast friend based on an animal known for being slow would be a ton of fun!

Of course I'm a fan of Sonic! I mean, I have Sonic the Hedgehog crew socks, for cryin' out loud! The first Sonic game I ever played was Sonic Heroes on Nintendo GameCube! It remains one of my favorites to this very day! I can't be the only one who wants a sequel, right? Incidentally, the first Sonic game I ever saw was the original game on Sega Genesis, but I never actually *played* a Sonic game until Heroes. **— RAYMOND HINSHAW**

From the discussion I've seen online, it seems to me that people tend to be very dismissive of 3D Sonic games. But I get annoyed by what I perceive as a knee-jerk "2D Sonic good, 3D Sonic bad" reaction, because I'm more or less the opposite. My first Sonic game was Sonic Adventure 2: Battle for the GameCube, and I got really into it for months. Since then, I've also played and enjoyed Sonic Adventure DX: Director's Cut, Sonic Heroes, Sonic Lost World (both the Wii U and 3DS versions), Sonic Forces and Sonic Frontiers. In contrast, 2D Sonic games have never really done it for me. I've tried Sonic the Hedgehog 1, 2 and CD, but none of them were really able to get me hooked. A few years ago, I even tried twice to play the universally beloved Sonic Mania, but both times, I got stuck at a dead end in Chemical Plant Zone, couldn't find a way around it and ended up giving up shortly afterward. **— JOHN NUTTALL**

I am an admirer of parts of the Sonic franchise. I really enjoy the classic games and the aesthetic of those early '90s entries in the series. The newer games don't do as much for me, personally. Though Superstars looks amazing. The first Sonic game that I recall playing was Sonic Adventure 2 when it got ported to GameCube. What a game!

I prefer 3D games to 2D. But this changes depending on the gameplay and the visual style of the game. Give me some gorgeous pixel art in 2D and you've sold me already. I think that exploration is done better on a 3D plane though. **— JEREMY S.**

My friend for Sonic would be Rhyonna the Cat! Similar to the avatar in Forces, she joined the rebellion and helped them beat up Infinite and Eggman. She keeps the Phantom Ruby prototype so she has similar powers to Infinite, but uses them much better. **— KYLA**

The friend for Sonic I would make is the last of Solaris in the form of a hedgehog. His name is Solar. After Sonic, Shadow and Silver beat Solaris, and Elise blew Iblis out, a bit of the flame remained. And that made Solar! I'm thinking of making a fan game about him sometime! **— SILAS**

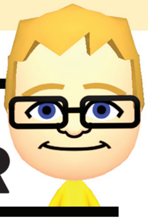
Yes, I'm a fan of the Sonic franchise! But the first game I played didn't do it justice, as it was Sonic 1, but on iPhone! Now I'm playing it on my 4K TV, via the Sega Genesis Mini, which is incredible!

I would say I strongly prefer the 2D graphics. Firstly because they're gorgeous and age very well! On the contrary, I think 3D games don't age very well . . . unless they're entirely remastered. Weirdly enough, I think it's easier to identify myself as the main character in 2D games than in 3D ones.

If Sonic would have a new animal friend, I would suggest an anti-Sonic character by definition, like for instance a girl snail! She would go very slow during the regular stages but would be robust against enemies (losing fewer rings if hit). Of course, in a Sonic game this wouldn't make sense . . . so to add excitation about it, there could be some triggers in the game that would slow down the entire game for an amount of time. Sonic would be affected and would become very slow, and the enemies too, but the snail would defy the time and go fast during that particular time period. New game mechanics could arise from that. As for her name, I would suggest just Snailee! **— PIERRE C.**

I didn't predict that two people would suggest a slow animal who makes up for their sluggishness with time control powers. Interesting!

CARTER'S CORNER



Hello again! I'll save the quiz answers for my Tears of the Kingdom review on Page 76 to talk about more things here.

Like the Nintendo Direct in June! I liked that there was a preview for the Scarlet & Violet DLC, but it didn't give a lot of new info – just some old Pokémon that didn't make the cut last November.

I started playing Pikmin 4 in late July, and I'm banking some of my screen time in August for the Pokémon DLC in September. And then I'll play lots of Mario Wonder on my birthday! (I'm sure I'll still like Odyssey more after playing it, but it looks fun.) And then the second part of the Pokémon DLC will probably launch in December, so I'll be pretty busy for the rest of the year.

Quiz time! What's my favorite kind of Pikmin, and what kind would I invent? See you next time!

READY TO SHRED THE SHREDDER'S PLANS!

Hey there, Nintendo Force! My son won the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles: Shredder's Revenge contest. It took a while to receive the game due to the delay of its physical release, and then it took a while longer for me to realize that we never sent over a photo. But I thought of it this week, and so here you go, a photo of Milo with the game in front of our game case. Thank you again! **— MARK KILBORN**

I'd say your timing's perfect, Mark, because printing this picture in this issue gives me a chance to remind our readers about the new Dimension Shellshock DLC that's coming to Shredder's Revenge on August 31! It'll be just $7.99 for anyone who already owns the game. (Like Milo!) And we've also just learned of another playable character it will be adding: Shredder's daughter, Karai! (Shredder's surely not as good of a Dad as Mark, though.) We'll review the DLC next time!

THE PLAYER'S POLL

Congratulations to **Stella**, the winner of our most recent Player's Poll! Your new chance to win is below, and this time around we're interested to read your responses to three questions about the SNES classic, Super Mario RPG!

QUESTION #1

We'll start with the obvious: Have you ever played Super Mario RPG before? If so, what did you think of it? If not, are you interested in the remake?

QUESTION #2

Super Mario RPG brought us Geno, a fan-favorite character that lots of people want to see in Smash. Do you want that?

QUESTION #3

Tons of remakes are emerging these days, but RPGs from the '90s seem to be very popular in particular. Which '90s RPG remake would you want next?

Send your responses to **PlayersPoll@NFMagazine.com** with the subject line "Player's Poll for Issue #68" – this time, one reader whose answers are picked for print will win the new Super Mario RPG for Nintendo Switch. Good luck!

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BY JOHN-CHARLES HOLMES

Nintendo's Profits Ascend Even More

Sales of The Legend of Zelda: Tears of the Kingdom are skyrocketing!

WE OPENED THE News section in our last issue with a report about the record-shattering box office success of The Super Mario Bros. Movie. Had that been Nintendo's only big win for the entirety of 2023, the company would still be laughing all the way to the bank! But . . . it wasn't. Not even close!

In a coordinated two-way pincer attack on Nintendo fans' wallets, Mario's insanely profitable theatrical release on April 5 was quickly followed by Link's latest sequel going on sale on May 12 – and it's proven to be just as mind-blowing in how well it's done.

According to Nintendo's latest financial report, which was released to the public on August 3, The Legend of Zelda: Tears of the Kingdom has already sold 18,510,000 copies! That's over 18.5 million in less than three months!! And this magazine issue is being published a few weeks later, so by the time you're reading this that number has surely already soared even higher still. I'd bet it's already passed the 20 million mark, and that's before heading into the annual holiday shopping season!

It can be hard to wrap your head around such ridiculously large numbers – but we can sure try! Did you know only three of the states in the United States have populations larger than 20 million? California, Texas and Florida. That's it! All the rest have census records clocking in somewhere below that, so if you live anywhere else in this country, that means more copies of Tears of the Kingdom have been sold than there are people in your entire state! Imagine every single man, woman and child you see in your everyday life – every single person in your city and beyond, all the way to the state line, owning and playing the newest Zelda. (And there still being more copies left over after that!)

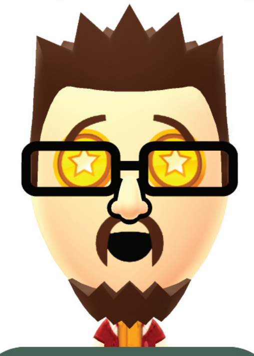
It's truly wild. It's such a stunning success that it has, of course, given a huge boost to Nintendo's bottom line as an entire company. Says their report:

"The Legend of Zelda: Tears of the Kingdom, which was released on May 12, has made a major contribution to Q1 sales in the current environment, in which we see widespread adoption of Nintendo Switch hardware and continued play engagement by many consumers. Sell-through of this one title constitutes approximately half of the first-party software sold this fiscal year. Consumers who played the previous entry, The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild, have been the primary driver, but as the weeks have passed, we have seen that a growing percentage of purchases are being made by consumers who have not yet played that title."

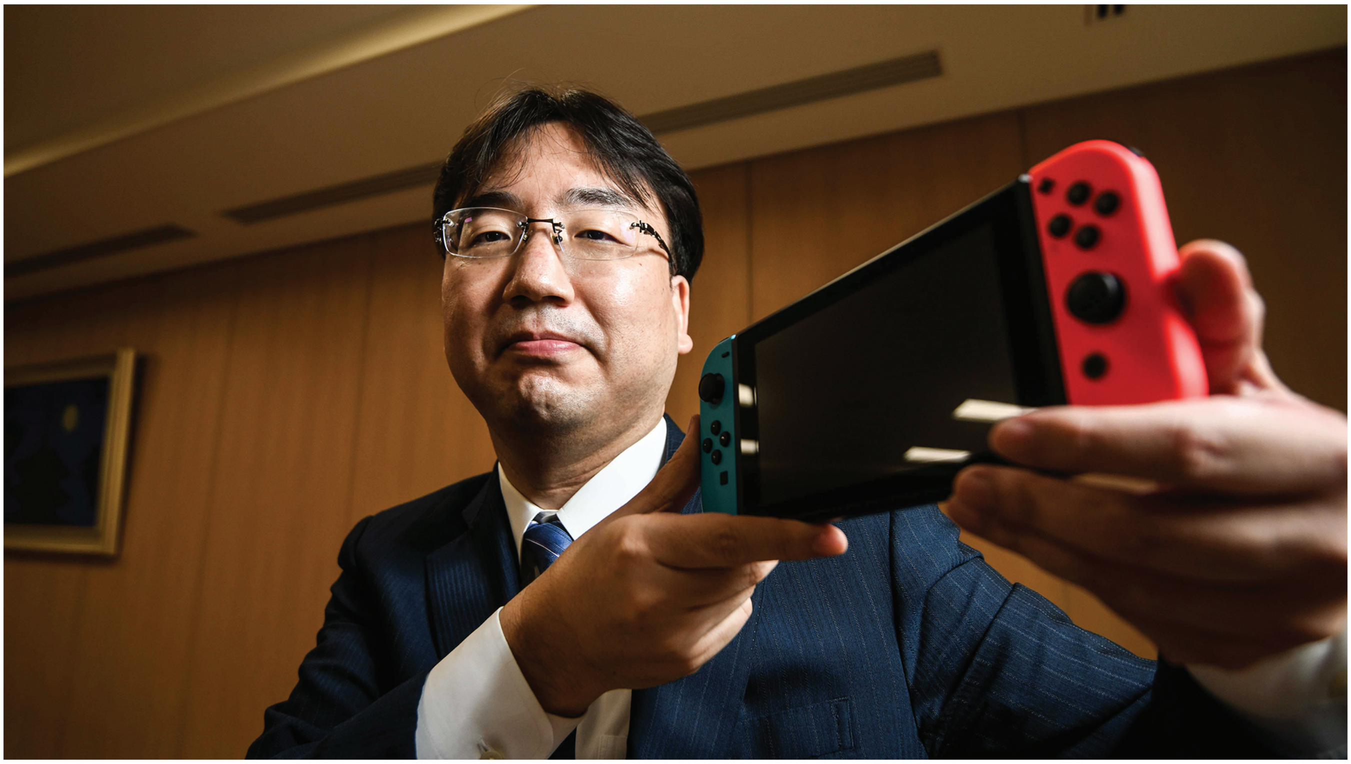
Half of all games sold by Nintendo are Tears of the Kingdom? That's nuts!

Apparently the game has done so well that the entire economy of Japan was boosted by a few percentage points. Imagine being so successful with a product launch that it actually affects an entire nation's standing on the world stage!

I *think* it's probably safe to say that Nintendo has been pleased with the game's performance, and Zelda fans can expect many more adventures in the land of Hyrule in the years to come! **– LUCAS**



> "The real Tears of the Kingdom turned out to be tears of joy, as Nintendo watches their bank account total climb higher and higher – and they'll be wiping those tears away with fistfuls of cash instead of tissues! – **LUCAS**"



Switch 2 Rumors Abound

If the latest insider information is correct, we're just about one year away.

THE RUMOR MILL is churning once more.

Whispers of a follow-up to the Nintendo Switch have been spread around for years – sometimes rising in volume, sometimes quieting down to near silence. But rumors have really started to roar recently, and it truly does seem like we're drawing near to an announcement. (Or at least an acknowledgement.)

The latest "news" making the rounds online originated with a piece published by Video Games Chronicle on July 31. According to reporter Andy Robinson, Nintendo's next console is planned to go on sale "during the second half of 2024." Beyond that general release window, though, some other potential details have also been revealed.

The Switch 2 (we'll call it that for now; no official name has been made known at this point) will apparently stick with the hybrid handheld/home machine direction Nintendo established with the current Switch, as it's said to still allow for portable play. That makes sense – it would be weird and honestly disastrous for them to backtrack on that most important feature of the current hardware. The idea of Nintendo doing another TV-only home machine seems truly odd at this point! Not to say it would never happen in the future – I just can't picture it right now.

But there's more! The screen on the Switch 2 may not be an OLED. Instead, Nintendo may launch the new system with an LCD screen, just like the Switch 1 had for its debut in 2017.

. . . Well, maybe not *just* like. Since LCD screens have improved in the last few years, it would certainly look better. Just maybe not quite as eye-catching as the OLED display, which they could hold on to for a Switch 2 OLED Model years later.

Another rumor says the Switch 2 screen would measure 8 inches on the diagonal, though, which would be a considerable size increase even when compared to the Switch 1 OLED . . . and that, if true, would probably mean larger Joy-Cons? Not sure if they could fit an 8-inch display into the same form factor.

How about another rumor? The issue of backwards compatibility is apparently not decided yet. Being able to play Switch 1 software on Switch 2 would be critically important – there would surely be a major backlash if Nintendo didn't include that feature and instead expected everyone to start back over from scratch with their game collections. Third-party publishers are supposedly pressuring Nintendo to *not* have backwards compatibility, because that would mean they'd be able to resell their Switch 1 games to Switch 2 owners – with Deluxe editions or the like. But I can't see them caving to such pressure.

While it's true that Nintendo's home machines have a poor track record of offering backwards compatibility – only the Wii and Wii U had that feature – I think a better lineage to look at for this situation is the company's handheld history. There, every new generation has been able to play the previous generation's games. The Game Boy Color could play older Game Boy cartridges. Game Boy Advance could play Game Boy Color games. The DS had a GBA cartridge slot in its first units, and the 3DS would accept DS games too. The only break in the line is the Switch not playing 3DS carts – but that's entirely understandable. I think Switch 2 will play Switch 1 titles just fine, and if it doesn't, I'll print a big, bold apology in a future NF issue to atone for offering any of you false hope here!

Yet more rumors have attempted to pin down a more specific October 2024 release and even a price tag of $429.99 . . . I don't know how much I believe those at this point. But who knows? We are really getting to a point where Nintendo's going to have to say something publicly fairly soon, and it's certainly possible that these kinds of details are already set behind the scenes and could be leaking out. I guess we'll find out for sure soon enough! Whenever it finally appears, I hope the Switch 2 ends up being all that you hope it will be! **– LUCAS**

EDITOR'S NOTE: THAT'S NOT A SWITCH 2 SHOWN ABOVE, JUST SO YOU KNOW. THAT'S NINTENDO PRESIDENT SHUNTARO FURUKAWA HOLDING A CURRENT SWITCH. BUT HE IS ONE OF THE FEW PEOPLE ON THE PLANET WHO TRULY KNOWS WHAT'S PLANNED FOR SWITCH 2!

COLLECTOR'S CORNER

Evolved Power Plushes

Bring home Kirby's new Forgotten Land looks.

THERE'S A CYCLE to Kirby plushes. San-ei will release a set with Kirby and other characters or enemies that appear in a new game. (We got Kirby, Elefin and an Awoofy in the first set.) Next, they move on to new Copy Abilities. (They released the Mouthful Mode plushes alongside Hammer, Sleep, Drill and Ranger forms in the last set.) I thought that might have been the end of the series, but this new set features the Evolved Copy Abilities that Kirby can upgrade in the game. Deep Sleep, Toy Hammer, Frosty Ice and (my favorite) Chain Bomb make up this new set of plushes, set to be released this November. I would check import shops on these, because very few Forgotten Land plushes seem to be making it to North America officially.

Knuckle Up

The Nendoroid roster just keeps growing!

GOOD SMILE CONTINUES to find inspiration in popular video game franchises for their Nendoroid line of figures. I'm surprised they hadn't done one already, but none other than Knuckles the Echidna will be made into a Nendoroid, following Sonic and Tails before him. He'll have eye parts to look left, right or straight, and mouth parts to grin, grit his teeth or frown. He'll also come with a Chaos Emerald. He's due in January 2024.

Moving to an indie franchise, the Knight and Hornet from Hollow Knight are both coming soon. While the Knight is expected in January with Knuckles, Hornet will actually precede them, as she has a November 2023 release date. Odd that a side character would release first, but maybe Good Smile knows something we don't know about a Silksong release date?! The Knight will come with his cloak in both closed and open styles, his Nail, some attack effect parts and a Knightling. Similarly, Hornet will come with two cloak styles, her Needle, effect pieces and a Cogfly.

Build Your own Pac-Man Machine

LEGO's take on the arcade classic is surprisingly functional!

IF YOU'VE EVER dreamed of owning an arcade Pac-Man cabinet but never had the thousand or so dollars lying around to be able to afford it, consider this brand-new LEGO Pac-Man cabinet that retails at around $270. (At least, that's how I'm pitching this purchase to my wife!)

LEGO has partnered with Bandai Namco to bring us this brilliant 2,600+ piece set that features lights, movement and many little Easter eggs and details that will make any Pac-Man fan drool. The cab features the iconic side art and marquee, and the coin slot even lights up! A crank on the side makes the action happen on the "screen," where Pac-Man chases dots and the ghosts chase him. The ghosts and Pac-Man on the top twirl as well, revealing blue vulnerable ghosts. The inside of the cabinet reveals the cogs and gears that make the screen work, but also features a Pac-Man fan minifigure and a miniature Pac-Man arcade cabinet with a stool. The high score even gets updated as you play! LEGO really threw all their building prowess behind this one to make it special!

In LEGO Super Mario news, they just released a set with a pair of airships featuring the faces and figures of Larry and Morton Koopa Jr. A pirate Goomba also rides along. A second set is Dry Bowser's Castle, featuring the new Dry Bowser figure, a Bone Goomba, a Blargg and a captured Purple Toad.

BY BRETT MARTIN

Take Your Pik

Choose your favorite, or collect them all!

PIKMIN MERCH ALWAYS seems to skyrocket in value, and we don't see a whole lot of it. Pikmin 4 has brought a number of good pre-order promos like pins and keychains, but now the official retail merch is coming.

First up is a set of terrariums from Re-ment (a company already well known for great Kirby and Pokémon terrarium scenes). They're perfect for capturing scenes of the games they encapsulate. In one, Olimar plucks a red Pikmin, and in others the Pikmin take on a Bulborb or Blowhog. They're also seen hefting an orange or playing in the landscape. These are not Pikmin 4-specific, as many of these scenes could be from any of the games.

The other set of merch comes from San-ei, and it's something I needed to see immediately after completing the game: an Oatchi plush! He's joined by the new Ice Pikmin. I'd love to see figures of the Rescue Ops crew and/or their ship, but we'll see what happens!

It Sees You

E.M.M.I.'s arrival is imminent!

BEWARE, BOUNTY HUNTERS: The Extraplanetary Multiform Mobile Identifier is coming! (Not in the scary coming-to-grab-you way, but in Good Smile's new E.M.M.I. figma.) Slated for a May 2024 release date, this figma will pair nicely with the gorgeous Samus figma from Metroid Dread that releases this October. What's great – or terrifying – about this figma is it can take on forms from the game: It can be the towering kill machine or it can be the crawling-on-the-ceiling kill machine! It also comes with a faceplate for the latter form, and the DNA-extracting spike for the murdery bit. The paint job is just astounding on this one, and along with all of the intricate details and differently textured parts it earns its larger-size figure price tag, which is around $150. (Just keep it behind glass.)

It's Richter's Turn

The Smash star steps into the Netflix series' spotlight.

JUST IN TIME for this year's Halloween season, the fright-filled animated Castlevania series is coming back to Netflix with a new subtitle and a new star: Richter Belmont! It's been a long time since the actual Castlevania games featuring Richter made their debut back in the '90s (and the excellent Symphony of the Night that I've already mentioned once in this magazine has still never been ported to a Nintendo system), so Switch players probably know him best from Super Smash Bros. Ultimate. Well, get ready to see his full story play out in TV show form!

. . . If you're old enough to watch, that is. Netflix's Castlevania show is an entirely adults-only affair, thanks to gruesomely detailed depictions of violence and other content that shouldn't be seen by anyone under the age of 18. (Even that might be too young.) So Mom and Dad, make sure the kids are put to bed before you begin your binge of this one!

If you want to get up to speed before the show, 2021's Castlevania Advance Collection includes Richter's debut, Castlevania: Dracula X. It's not the series' best, but it's not too bad! Give it a try! **– LUCAS**

Sonic Goes for 3

His third film has started shooting . . . kind of.

THE MARIO MOVIE has raised the bar (and the earnings expectations) for video game adaptations on the big screen, and Hollywood's surely been scrambling to lock down more game franchise rights in the last few months following its stunning box office success. But most of those projects are likely years away from being revealed – meanwhile, the first confirmed video game film to officially enter production in the wake of The Super Mario Bros. Movie is Sonic the Hedgehog 3!

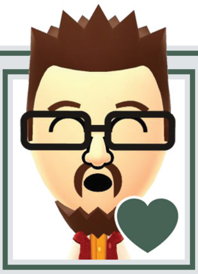
The third Sonic live-action film is set to begin shooting scenes in September – that work may already be under way by the time you read this. But there's a catch! Due to the ongoing writers' and actors' strikes in Hollywood, the only scenes Sonic the Hedgehog 3 will be able to shoot right away are the ones in which no human actors will appear.

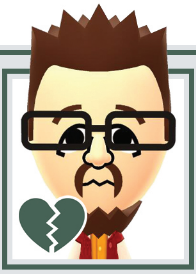
Even though Sonic, Tails, Knuckles (and certain other characters) are brought to life using CGI in these movies, the directors have still filmed real backgrounds and used real camera motions throughout each set to establish a baseline for the CGI artists to start from – Sonic and the rest have been in the scenes as physical dummy statues that later get animated over. So those are the scenes being done now . . . and hopefully the production will be able to bring the human actors in soon, following a resolution of the strikes! (Though it looks like progress on those is slow. Not Sonic's preferred speed at all.)

Sonic the Hedgehog 3 is currently planned to debut in theaters in December 2024. (Here's hoping it doesn't get pushed back!) If that's too long for you to wait, though, the Paramount Plus streaming service is supposed to be debuting a spin-off show starring Knuckles before the end of this year! **– LUCAS**

> "I enjoyed the first Sonic film, and the second one was even better – except for that way-too-long nonsensical sequence in the middle of the movie where all the game characters disappeared and it turned into a weird wedding comedy. What was that all about? Let's hope Sonic 3 sticks to the game characters . . . and that Jim Carrey returns as Eggman, because rumor has it he's been wanting to retire from acting entirely! – **LUCAS**"

Great!
Castlevania is getting new episodes of its show.





Oh.
Castlevania still isn't getting any new games.*

*No, the Dead Cells expansion doesn't count!

FORECAST

A meteorological look at the biggest game and DLC releases currently scheduled to debut in the next few months.

WE'RE HEADING INTO harvest season once again, and the fine folks at XSEED and Marvelous are ready to capitalize by sending us back to the farm with Rune Factory 3 Special. It's due to debut on September 5, and will be a spruced-up remake of the original Rune Factory 3, which was a Nintendo DS game that first went on sale back in 2010. We're already at work on a review, so come back next time to read it!

YOU MAY WANT to go ahead and send out some invitations for a Switch-playing party at your place, because you'll need as many friends gathered as possible to best enjoy Super Bomberman R 2 when it launches on September 13. The Bomberman titles were in-person multiplayer party gaming staples for years even before Mario Party 1 came along!

SPEAKING OF THE number 1, let's complete the countdown of major September releases thusly: following Rune Factory 3 Special and Super Bomberman R 2 will be Mortal Kombat 1! Promotion has been in high gear for this latest brutal fighting game, but don't you dare let the youngest gamers in your life watch even one of the trailers the MK team has put out: They are all beyond gruesome. The game drops on September 19.

LOOKING AHEAD TO October, we'll get the long-awaited Switch sequel to 2018's Detective Pikachu 3DS game on the 6th of the month. I guess it took them over half a decade to continue the story of the video game because they spent a lot of time and effort also adapting it into a live-action movie in the meanwhile? (When's the next one of those?)

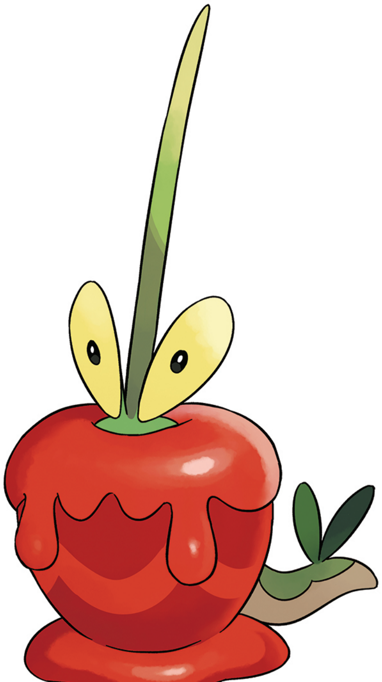
FINALLY, WE'LL ARRIVE at the launch date for the next chapter of the sidescrolling Super Mario saga on October 20. We took a first look at this creative new spin on 2D Mario in our last issue and have prepared a larger preview for it in the pages ahead (flip to Page 44 for that), and we'll go even bigger next time as we kick off review coverage. That might end up spread across two issues! We want to give this one full attention!

THE OTHER SIDESCROLLER battling for your attention and investment in the months ahead will be the all-new Sonic Superstars, which has raced ahead of Mario in our Previews section: Its preview begins three pages earlier! Will it beat Mario to market, though? Sega still hasn't set a specific date as we're going to press, so it might. Or might not!

> Nintendo will probably spring an extra surprise or two on us as we get closer to the start of this year's holiday shopping season, but even if they didn't, I'd still be happy to be heading toward the end of 2023 with both a brand-new Mario and brand-new Sonic to get to play alongside my kids. Hmm . . . better go ahead and call my characters. I want to be Luigi in Wonder, and Amy in Superstars. (She has that awesome hammer!) — LUCAS

JUST LOOK AT that absolute avalanche of logos and names! The tediously lengthily named Pokémon Scarlet & Violet DLC, The Hidden Treasure of Area Zero, Part 1: The Teal Mask will be available to play beginning on September 13. Trainers who set out on its new adventure in the brand-new land of Kitakami will get to meet several new Pokémon, including the one seen below: Dipplin, a brand-new evolution of Applin!

I'll be excited for my sons to have some actual new Pokémon content to play, because for months all they've been doing in Scarlet & Violet is endlessly Surprise Trading monsters and get tons of clearly hacked Shinies in return. It's been truly boring.



BY THOR THORVALDSON

Running Back to the Starting Line

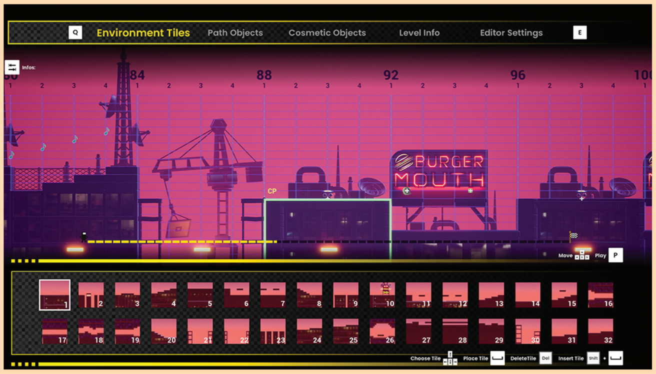
His modern 3D look abandoned, CommanderVideo will return to his original 2D blocky self in BIT.TRIP RERUNNER.

COMMANDERVIDEO WAS THE first indie sidescrolling superstar to make it big on Nintendo consoles, and he's gearing up for a retro-charged reboot! In fact, all of the Commander's original WiiWare titles took influence from 1980s hits, including Pong, Missile Command and Pac-Man. But it was BIT.TRIP RUNNER, which fused the auto-scrolling mechanics of Moon Patrol with the underlying platforming principals of Pitfall!, that really sprang into people's hearts.

Runner spawned two direct sequels (aptly named RUNNER2 and RUNNER3, respectively) which transformed this previously blocky biome and its odd inhabitants into a Monty Python-meets-Looney Tunes exercise in the unexpected. Charles Martinet, the voice of Mario, even got in the mix! Though the Commander's new look didn't rely on nostalgia for appeal, his march to modern visuals left some feeling nostalgic for his original 2009 design. It all became an inception of retrospection, a wistful want for games of today to look like games from 14 years ago trying to look like games from 41 years prior.

Well the folks at Choice Provisions heard the cries for the low-res original Commander's return, though he's still running through worlds that are dazzlingly detailed. BIT.TRIP RERUNNER will marry CommanderVideo's classic sprite (plus potential variations on the man) to the same styles of environments seen in RUNNER2 and 3. Bosses from the first RUNNER, like the infamously named Non Trotski, will also get a high-poly facelift. With 150+ levels packed in, new abilities based on other BIT.TRIP titles and an online "RUNNER Maker" level editor in tow, RERUNNER looks to be the biggest, best BIT.TRIP title yet. So get yourself ready to run again! **— JONATHAN**

SWITCH PUBLISHER: CHOICE PROVISIONS DEVELOPERS: GAMECRAFT STUDIOS & CHOICE PROVISIONS RELEASE: TBA RATING: RP



His Name is Luka

THE WONDERFUL ONE: AFTER SCHOOL HERO

BACK IN 2013, The Wonderful 101 was an all-new, Nintendo-published title, directed by Hideki Kamiya of Viewtiful Joe and Bayonetta fame. That pedigree led fan expectations to run wild. For some, the superhero action game ended up being all they could have hoped for – though the general population seemed mostly confused by it. It was a character action game; the kind Kamiya-san is best known for, but it looked like Pikmin and forced you to draw shapes to change weapons? That mix of cutthroat, cute and quirky pushed away all but the most loyal and adventurous players.

Hopes that the world of The Wonderful 101 may find a broader audience were renewed in 2020, when a remaster of the Wii U original was announced for modern platforms, complete with a new, 2D side-scrolling bonus game. When I interviewed Kamiya-san about this additional mode, he said " . . . when the fans heard '2D action game' and 'Kamiya,' they immediately started talking about Viewtiful Joe. Of course I can't promise anything, but I really hope fans of Viewtiful Joe enjoy Luka's side story in The Wonderful 101."

It's a good thing Kamiya-san kept those promises to a minimum, because The Wonderful One: After School Hero plays almost nothing like Viewtiful Joe. That's probably because it was actually directed by Yosuke Matsumura, a relatively new member of PlatinumGames. It's his first time directing, too, so I don't blame him for doing his own thing.

Not coincidentally, After School Hero is about Luka Alan Smithee, a schoolboy who's working to become a full-fledged member of The Wonderful 101. He ends up in a battle that lies somewhere between a training mission and real-life super-hero work. Likewise, his game feels more like a long test flight for a solo project than an extension of the core Wonderful 101 campaign.

Instead of borrowing from Viewtiful Joe, After School Hero takes its cues from Mega Man, Capcom's biggest 2D action series. Luka starts off with three different beams (standard, spreadshot and reflecting laser), with each having their own advantages and draw-backs. Going from room to room, Luka must destroy enemies, rescue civilians and open doors by blasting targets. Dashing, jumping, shooting and calling in other members of The Wonderful 101 for support make up the bulk of the action.

Enemies and backdrops are recycled from the main game, though much of the sound is new. Fully voice-acted motion comic cutscenes detail an original story showing Luka's struggles to keep his schoolboy social life separate from his superhero shenanigans. The soundtrack consists of Mega Man-sounding remixes of songs from the 2013 original, culminating in a reimagining of the Wonderful 101 theme. Fittingly enough, Luka sings this one song solo, and the lyrics have been changed accordingly.

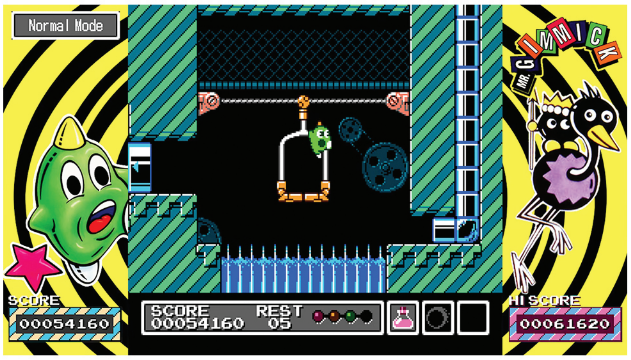
It's a cute touch that sums up the intent of this bite-sized adventure. The whole thing is 12 stages long and takes about two hours to beat. While After School Hero didn't feel particu-larly deep on the first playthrough, it was designed to be replayed by fighters seeking perfection. Almost everything in each level can be destroyed for points, so ambitious players can always go back to old stages for higher scores if they want to compete on the online leader-boards.

If it weren't tethered to the game that inspired it, The Wonderful One might have become more popular than its big brother; its sidescrolling play is way more accessible than the wildly complicated game it came from. But it's too light and breezy to be very memorable. A full-length game in this style, complete with new weapons to obtain as you go, could be a classic. Maybe we'll get a Wonderful Two in the future?

In the meantime, this tiny romp with a hero-to-be, noticeably small but still packed with potential, is worth a look! **– JONATHAN**

SWITCH PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER: PLATINUMGAMES RATING: E

7.5



Starshooting Sidescroller

GIMMICK! SPECIAL EDITION

DURING THE LIFETIME of the NES, Sunsoft earned a reputation for being among the best in squeezing unbelievable amounts of power from Nintendo's 8-bit system. Perhaps their most impressive feat was Gimmick!, a game that was sadly only ever available in Japan and Scandinavia. The Sunsoft of today has finally rectified that problem with an official North American release, and even though this new version isn't without its flaws, it's still an incredible experience.

Gimmick! is a momentum-based platformer. (Think of the weight of Sonic the Hedgehog, but without the speed.) You play as an adorable little guy named Yumetaro who has the unique ability to summon and throw stars. These can be used for offense, but with a little mastery they can also be utilized to help explore stages – a skill that's necessary if you want to find all the secrets and see the true ending.

Gimmick! is a meticulously designed game with a number of extremely tricky areas that require a crazy amount of precision . . . which unfortunately shines a bright light on this release's biggest problem: input lag. The original version was designed to be played on a CRT TV with a wired controller, and when played under those circumstances, it's an incredibly precise experience. This new port regrettably introduces a few frames' worth of lag, which thankfully isn't game-breaking, but it does make several things considerably more difficult. Thankfully it's also got rewind and save states available, so you can try getting through those tricky bits as many times as you like. Also thankfully, the input lag only seems to affect TV Mode, as it feels significantly reduced when playing handheld.

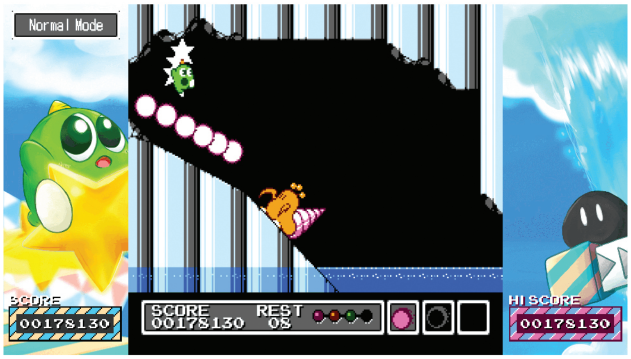
But for as good as the underlying game is, this new package is surprisingly bare-bones. Retro re-releases have come a long way in recent years, and while it's not realistic to expect every game to be up to, say, Digital Eclipse's museum-worthy standards, a few cartridge and manual scans aren't really enough anymore, especially for a game that's getting a physical release from Limited Run. There are no screen filtering options, and limited border designs, none of which actually remove the superfluous and somewhat distracting extra score tickers. The game only plays in its Japanese form, with no option to play either the Scandinavian version – which featured completely different instrumentation on the game's extraordinary soundtrack – or its updated arcade release Gimmick! Exact Mix. There are achievements and speedrunning/difficulty options, but that's about it as far as extras go. Not too special of a Special Edition.

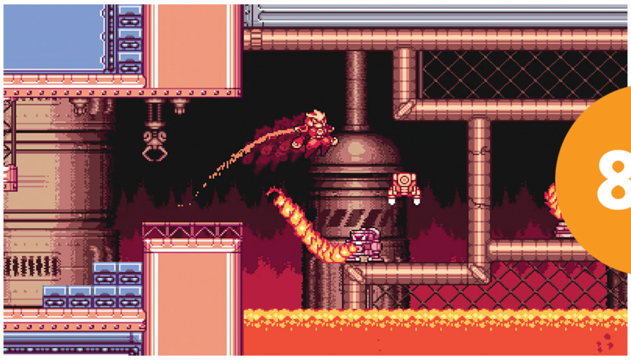
Which isn't to say that Gimmick! isn't worth your time, because it absolutely is – it just deserves better than this. Very few games of this vintage attempted to do gameplay like this, and even fewer pulled it off with this level of grace, style and love. For example, there's a screen in Level 2 that exists solely for the purpose of standing there and looking at a beautiful seascape. How many other games do stuff like that?

It's hard to put into words just how unique Gimmick! is, and even though this iteration leaves a lot to be desired, it's a far cry from being anything resembling "bad." That Gimmick! is finally readily available for new audiences to play is a true joy, and everyone involved has done the world a service in making this release a reality. **– KRIS**

7.5

SWITCH PUBLISHER: BITWAVE GAMES DEVELOPERS: BITWAVE GAMES, CITY CONNECTION & SUNSOFT RATING: E





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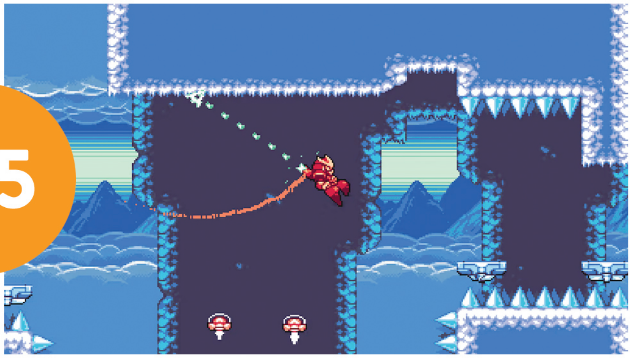


Put an End to the Virus Army's Uprising!

GRAVITY CIRCUIT

WHAT'S YOUR FAVORITE sub-genre of platformer? "Puzzle"? "Run and gun"? "Search action"? Me, I'm all about the "Mega Man-like"! The Blue Bomber's adventures are so consistent, it logically follows that copycats would inherit many of those same addictive qualities.

And brother, if a game doesn't get more "Mega Man-like" than this . . .

Progression and play mechanics are lifted directly from the Mega Man Zero series rather than the Classic line, from the home base you visit between missions to the Booster Chips you equip to enhance your skills. Then there's your signature tool, the Hookshot, used to swing across chasms or pierce distant foes, which functions almost identically to Zero's Chain Rod.

The story sounds familiar as well: Years ago, the nine Circuits of the Guardian Corps warded off the invading Virus Army, then mysteriously vanished. Only Kai, the titular Gravity Circuit, was recovered, albeit in an unresponsive state. He awakens decades later just as the Virus Army resurfaces, now led by his eight former comrades.

As you probably surmised, the Circuits are analogous to Robot Masters, going as far as aping the naming convention of "Ability Description" plus "Man" ("Circuit" in this case). You'll tangle with the likes of Shift Circuit, a speed demon who rules the road; Wave Circuit, a pop sensation who attacks with sound; and Cipher Circuit, a tech wiz who hangs around in cyberspace. Their domains are every bit as diverse as their personalities, ensuring that every mission feels fresh and exciting.

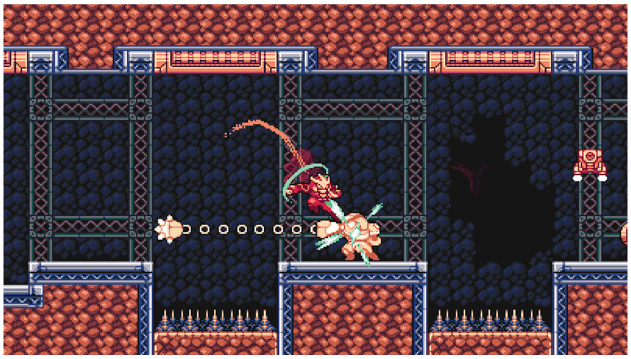
While the overall challenge sits at the "NES hard" level, the learning curve is much steeper than that of the game's 8-bit predecessor, thanks to a combat system focused on close-quarters grappling instead of long-distance sniping. Kai deals damage with a flurry of punches and kicks, while his underpowered but extremely versatile Hookshot can redirect enemy projectiles and pick up stunned opponents. Perfecting these techniques opens up some stylish combos – dropkick an aerial gunner, hoist its motionless body to toss at and disarm a shielded sentry, catch the shield then toss it right back at the bewildered chump. Of course, reaching that mastery state can take an entire playthrough, so you won't be able to enjoy the fruits of your training unless you attempt a New Game+ run.

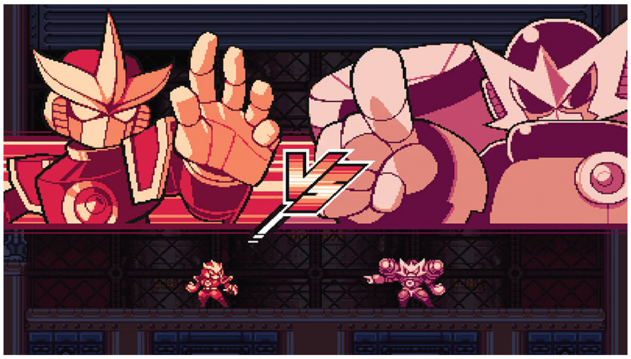
Another knock against this title is stage length – they're *waaaaay* too long! Old-school Mega Man level design involves introducing fresh gimmicks in isolation, then gradually layering new parameters throughout a course. But because the levels here are so massive, entire rooms of obstacles tend to be reused with little to no change in difficulty. It's fortunate that checkpoints are so plentiful and lives infinite, because I guarantee most players would drop the game entirely rather than be forced to replay these exhausting and repetitious zones from the beginning.

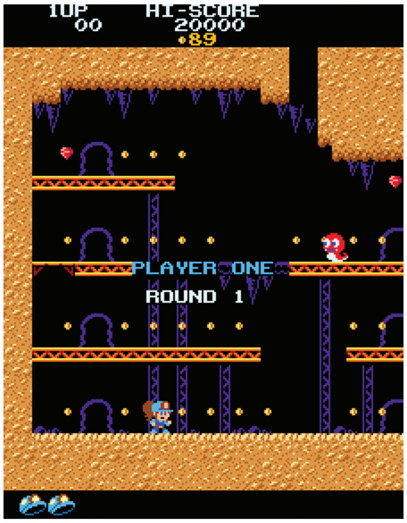
Even so, Gravity Circuit exudes enough style and variety to compel hardcore platformer aficionados to the finish and beyond. It also doesn't hurt that the soundtrack slaps! That Initial D-inspired Eurobeat riff in the highway stage? Straight fire! Credit to composer Dominic Ninmark, a man who knows his way around Mega Man-style arrangements. (Check his work on the highly anticipated fan game Mega Man X: Corrupted to have your mind blown!)

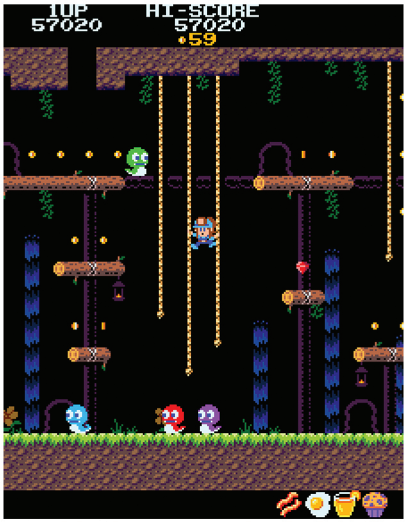
This highly technical style of action platforming may not be all that attractive to general audiences, but seasoned Mega Man pros will most definitely relish their time in Gravity Circuit's orbit. **– TONY**

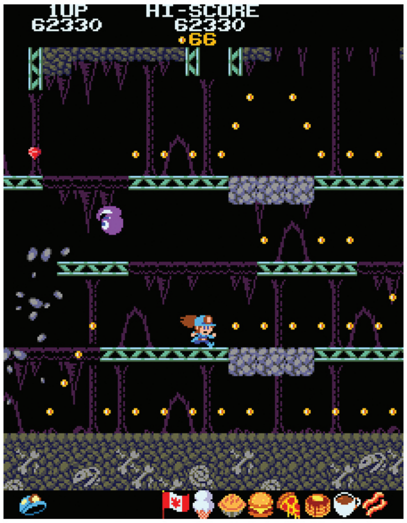
SWITCH PUBLISHER: PLUG IN DIGITAL DEVELOPER: DOMESTICATED ANT GAMES RATING: E10+











Pac-Man from a Different Perspective

ANNALYNN

WHAT IF PAC-MAN had been a platformer? No, I don't just mean a platformer featuring the character of Pac-Man, like Pac-Land or Pac-Man World. I mean, what if the actual gameplay of the original Pac-Man game were applied to the platformer genre? That's the question that Annalynn poses, and the answer is an incredibly addictive and clever game!

Annalynn puts you in control of a miner who's out to collect gold, and each stage just so happens to be a mine with gold nuggets lined up just like the dots in Pac-Man. A stage is cleared when all the nuggets are collected, but also like in Pac-Man, there's a group of unsavory, color-coded monsters out to get you. Instead of ghosts, Annalynn must avoid a quartet of snakes named Randy, Handy, Candy and Mike. Fortunately for her, she can collect gems, this game's equivalent to Power Pellets, that turn all the snakes blue, allowing her to temporarily defeat them.

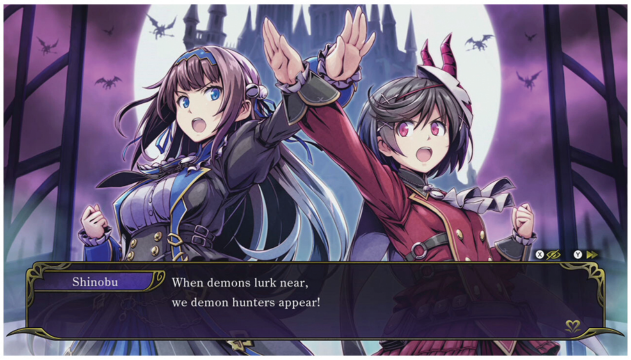
While the core mechanics are pure Pac-Man, the game itself is a sidescrolling platformer, which adds a surprising degree of challenge, and some clever new wrinkles. Unlike Pac-Man's mazes, Annalynn's stages contain dead ends, so it's easy to get yourself trapped — though, since you can actually jump in this game, all it takes is a little skill to get yourself out of danger. But the real difference is the way the enemies move. Unlike Annalynn, the snakes can't jump, but they have a couple of other advantages that make up for their shortcomings. They have the ability to travel freely through a series of caves, effectively teleporting around the stage at will, and each level has background pathways that only the snakes can cross. So while Annalynn will fall down to the next level below if she tries to walk on them, the snakes will keep on going.

The Pac-Man references permeate more than just the gameplay too, with cutscenes appearing between stages and an overall visual aesthetic that's a dead ringer for arcade titles from that era. Eventually even more mechanics get introduced too that incorporate elements from games like Mappy and Donkey Kong Jr.

Annalynn is a perfect pick-up-and-play game. It takes seconds to get started, and it never feels unfair. And it's cheap! It's priced at only $4.99, making it an easy impulse buy for anyone with even a passing interest — as well as an absolute must for any fan of the classic arcade age of the early '80s! **— KRIS**

9.0

SWITCH
PUBLISHER: SUMMITSPHERE
DEVELOPER: CRUISE ELROY
RATING: E



The Slash ’n Shoot Sisters
GAL GUARDIANS: DEMON PURGE

ONCE UPON A TIME, The Kingdom of Inti Creates celebrated the birth of a new fast-paced, Castlevania-inspired action game called Grim Guardians: Demon Purge. Then the complicated, weirdly sticky dark priest known as Copyright Law paid a visit to Inti Creates and demanded the newborn game change its name. And that’s how Grim Guardians became Gal Guardians: Demon Purge. And . . . everyone lived happily ever after? Sure, why not.

Gal Guardians’ name switcheroo is probably for the best, as it makes its ties to Inti Creates’ Gal Gun series more clear. If you’re already a fan of Gal Gun, then you might already know this is a 2D spin-off of the Gal Gun on-rail shooter series. If you’re not already a fan, all I can say is welcome to Sexy Castlevania.

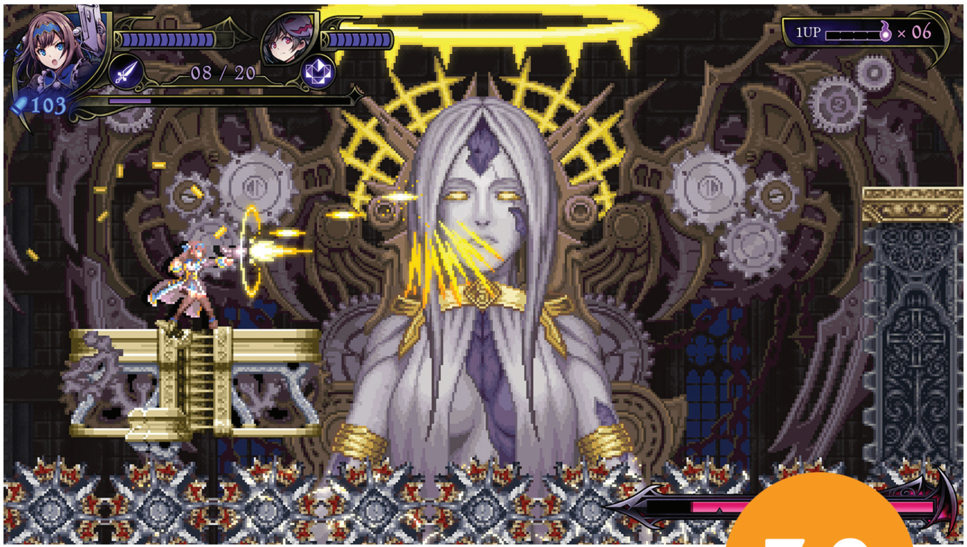
The Gal Gun series’ in-your-face fanservice isn’t my cup of virgin’s blood, but Gal Guardians’ smooth action thankfully takes precedence over its story. The game stars two sisters, Shinobu and Maya Kamizono, who are experienced demon hunters. When their academy is overtaken by monsters, the Kamizono girls spring into action: Shinobu with her trusty long-range gun, and Maya with her slashing sword and origami-based weapons.

The sisters are a blast to control, whether you swap between them as a single player or recruit a fellow vampire hunter to play alongside you. However, dull backgrounds and forgettable levels bridge the game’s intense, screen-filling boss battles. Gal Guardians is still fun, but its downtime makes it harder to recommend over similar games – including some of Inti Creates’ own works.

This game wears its Castlevania inspirations like a gothic skin, but it’s not a Metroidvania. Rather, it recalls the Castlevanias of ancient times: pure-blooded 2D action games that only offer a handful of split paths to follow. There is no map, merely a compass that gives you the vague direction of each level’s boss. That said, Gal Guardians still tips its hat to Castlevania: Portrait of Ruin with the ability to switch between two characters on the fly. Shinobu and Maya also have fighting styles that resemble Mega Man X and Zero’s favored methods of attack in Mega Man X4, X5 and X6. And I’m not someone who can ever say "no" to Zero’s saber-based combat.

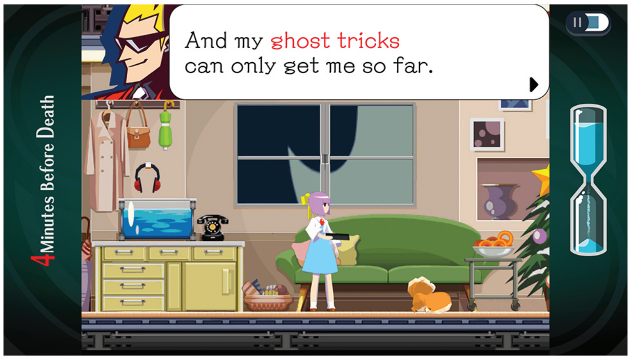
You get to pull out all the stops on those skills when you go up against Gal Guardians’ hulking bosses, but the routes in between are plowed through and forgotten. That’s not an unforgivable sin, but the Switch is not lacking for action games that are nothing less than stellar. Heck, Inti Creates’ own Curse of the Moon series is arguably the better Castlevania spoof. The Curse of the Moon games know why Castlevania games are still compelling, and they lean into those strengths: from the richly inspired chiptunes, to the chunky pixels outfitted in splotchy, dark 8-bit colors, to the moody cast of characters that take down the creatures of the night in their own specialized way. It doesn’t have high-pitched voice clips from a couple of very anime protagonists, however, so you make the call.

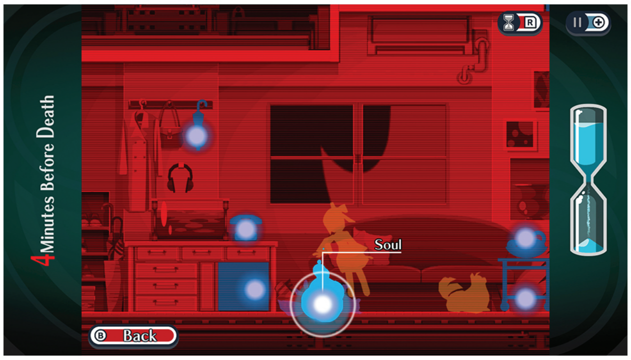
Gal Guardians: Demon Purge isn’t the best game the action-platformer genre has to offer, but it’s far from unplayable. It’s worth picking up on sale – or sooner, if you’re really into Inti Creates’ gals ’n guns. **– NADIA**



7.0

SWITCH PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER: INTI CREATES RATING: T





The Hero Who Haunts

GHOST TRICK: PHANTOM DETECTIVE

DEBUTING AT THE end of its first system's lifespan (just as many narrowly missed cult classics do), Ghost Trick: Phantom Detective was a Nintendo DS game about defiance in the face of death – both within the fiction of its world and even now, in real life, as the game returns with a newly adapted, enhanced port on Switch. A solid contender for the strongest work from Ace Attorney creator Shu Takumi, Ghost Trick originally launched in 2011 as many DS players were transitioning to the 3DS. Despite slow sales, Ghost Trick quickly developed a fervent fanbase due to its uniquely strong gameplay and writing.

Players assume the role of Sissel, who, from the moment the game starts, is dead. A ghost emerges from his iconic slumped corpse, and with the guidance of a mysteriously enthusiastic desk lamp, he learns he can possess items to manipulate and activate them to traverse levels across his city and indirectly solve puzzles. Namely, Sissel discovers that when he tries to inhabit a dead body, he can rewind time to four minutes before that person's death in an attempt to intervene and change their untimely fate.

By rescuing and teaming up with a cadre of formerly doomed souls – including a headstrong young detective, a plucky Pomeranian and various faces from his past – players piece together Sissel's forgotten identity and the machinations that led to his untimely demise across the course of one particularly murderous night. The story treads familiar themes evocative of Ace Attorney, unfolding as a comedic and emotional drama of crime and punishment starring an infectiously charming cast of heroes and villains.

The characters truly come alive in the 3D environments of the game, with animation that was extremely smooth and expressive for the DS then, and still stands out now thanks to the smooth and newly upscaled HD visuals.

Each colorful stage is laid out as a Rube Goldberg device, just waiting to be set off by the player – as these environments come to life with lively characters interacting, scheming and dancing through each one. Figuring out how to command attention or subtly highlight key items through Sissel's poltergeist shenanigans is immensely satisfying, and it encourages players to think about these bespoke spaces heuristically. It's a testament to just how much personality and information the original developers managed to squeeze into the DS game (and just how well the visuals and design have aged).

Naturally, there are a few concessions that come with porting a DS game to an HD console. Obviously, one screen is pulling double duty here, luckily never feeling cramped thanks to an unobtrusive UI and clean, high-res character portraits. The touch controls also translate well to a standard controller, though touch controls reminiscent of the original can be used when playing portably, particularly with the use of a capacitive stylus. Even with unique features of the DS absent, the polished-up presentation and new accessibility of Ghost Trick render this as close to a definitive version of a certified classic as possible.

As games preservation becomes more of a pressing concern – with titles remaining landlocked to vintage platforms forever lost to time – it's increasingly rare that missed retro classics get a second chance at life like this. Ghost Trick fortunately remains a genuinely unique and surprising game that deserves to be played by anyone who loves puzzles, games and a fantastic narrative. Simply put, Ghost Trick: Phantom Detective is an ingeniously crafted experience, and this grand resurrection is not to be missed. **– JOHN-CHARLES**

SWITCH PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER: CAPCOM RATING: T

9.5

Deckbuilding in the Dark

INSCRYPTION

SWITCH PUBLISHER: DEVOLVER DIGITAL DEVELOPER: DANIEL MULLINS GAMES RATING: M

A SHADOWY FIGURE sits opposite you in a dimly lit room. He certainly isn't trustworthy, but for now, you've got no choice but to engage in his bizarre, ominous card game. Just be sure to win, because otherwise you may end up as his latest collectible!

At first glance, Inscryption fits cleanly into the increasingly popular deckbuilder/roguelike subgenre. Inspired by indie projects such as Slay the Spire, deckbuilders borrow the more appealing elements from real-world trading card games like Magic: The Gathering to allow players the joy of customizing a cohesive collection of cards.

To that end, Inscryption largely succeeds. The card battles play out through a series of strategic decisions focusing on sacrifice; many of your cards cannot be played without offing other creatures. How you position your cronies and when to sacrifice them are crucial strategic decisions that can mean the difference between victory and crushing defeat.

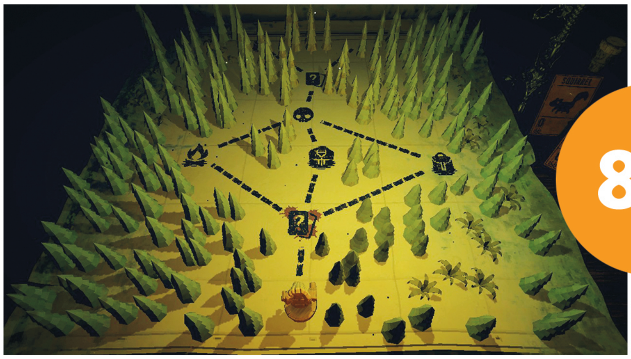
And just when you think you've got a good rhythm going, the game will toss in new elements to keep you on your toes. Suddenly, cards assembled from previous playthroughs are shuffled into the mix, you're working with a new resource in combat and . . . are the creatures in the cards conspiring to help you escape now?

Indeed, the real hook to this game is the larger narrative at play. While most deckbuilders are content to give you a simple goal to reach, Inscryption begins with the act of someone booting up an old disc and engaging in a battle of wits against a sinister gamemaster. Between rounds of playing cards with this creepo, your character is free to get up from the table and look around his eerie cabin for clues. These first-person exploration sequences are limited, but really add to the world-building as you piece together the mystery of what's going on in this world . . . and beyond.

In fact, it's this game's willingness to surprise the player that is its greatest strength. I won't go into detail about the myriad ways in which Inscryption does this, but suffice it to say there were plenty of moments where it blindsided me with fresh new ideas I'd not seen anywhere else. It isn't married to any particular gameplay conceit, content to discard, deconstruct and rejigger whatever preconceived notions you have about this genre (or even this medium) going in. It also wears its inspirations on its sleeve, from the aforementioned Slay the Spire to Internet "creepypasta" stories to even the Pokémon Trading Card Game on Game Boy Color (which is also now on Switch thanks to NSO!).

While the larger narrative is as fresh as it gets, the core gameplay is somewhat less refined. The cards don't seem to synergize particularly well compared to the best games in the genre, and a few tactics and creatures are unbalanced, leading to some strategies being much more effective than others. As a result, the card game Inscryption is centered around can feel a little unsatisfying or repetitious. As it's meant as more of a vehicle to the overarching story, it still works, but the best elements of deckbuilders are somewhat subdued here. That said, the post-game challenges are surprisingly robust for those looking for a more traditional experience.

Altogether, Inscryption holds up as a surprising and endearing labor of love. Give it a shot and you'll find one of the most original adventures on the system. **— MATTHEW T.**



8.5

On the Road Again
ROAD 96: MILE 0

ROAD 96: MILE 0 combines the emotional storytelling of 2021's Road 96 and the free-running rhythm gameplay of DigixArt's earlier title, Lost in Harmony, into an interesting combination of the wild landscapes of teenage emotion and the grounded reality of living in a totalitarian regime. It might not be a chocolate-and-peanut-butter combination, but it's one that works fairly well.

In the exclusive enclave of White Sands, teenage trombonist Zoe Muller and her best friend, Kaito Lin, get up to mischief despite their stations in life. (Zoe's the daughter of Petria's Minister of Oil, while Kaito, the main character of Lost in Harmony, is the son of immigrant laborers.) Most of their antics are through free-runner rhythm game levels, where the teens roll their way through surreal race courses painted by their imaginations – whether they're helping Zoe escape from another bodyguard or sabotaging the tai chi session. However, the specter of Petria's dark side looms over their heads, testing their relationship.

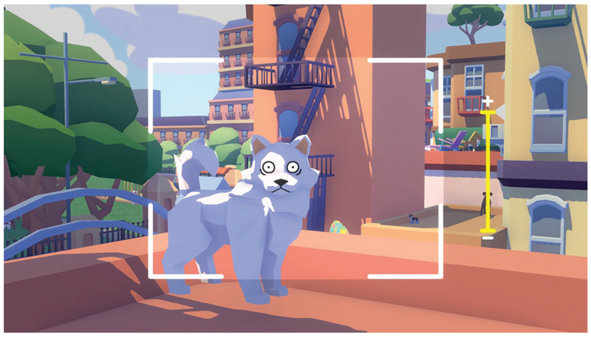
The free-runner rhythm levels are designed to be as frustration-free as possible – if you hit an obstacle, you start a few "beats" back, and you can skip a frustrating section after getting enough hits. They're mostly a generic combination of jumping, crouching, dodging and QTEs, but it's their design that really shines – a conversation between Kaito and Zoe about conditions in Kaito's hometown, for example, splits into mirror images of Zoe's perception and Kaito's reality as the two of them travel through both on a split screen. While most of the music is techno, there's one level that features a track from The Offspring, for that true late '90s flavor.

The minigames during the exploration portions are pretty weak. Mile 0 was originally designed for mouse controls, and one of the minigames has you hammering nails coming at you at a rapid pace, which is difficult to do using the Pro Controller. Luckily, it didn't seem like any of the minigames mattered to the plot; they were just there to break up the monotony of exploring the maps and gathering the information needed to unlock the next free runner level. What matters most are your convictions, which are once again a huge part of how the story plays out, and I was glad to see that mechanic return, albeit in a limited form.

While Mile 0 is a prequel, I recommend playing it after playing Road 96, because you will need a breather after all that drama. It's a fairly short experience with the added replay value of the free runner levels, but I would only recommend this to those who have played the original. (To read my review of that original, check out NF Issue #56!) **– REBECCA**

7.0

SWITCH PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER: DIGIXART RATING: T



Canine Candid Camera
PUPPERAZZI

8.0

DO YOU LIKE photos of dogs? Do you like *taking* photos of dogs? Pupperazzi will allow you to photograph puppers to your heart's content! You can then upload your snaps to dogNET, and hope your viewers like them as much as you do.

For each area you'll be given a set of tasks – including a secret task – to gain followers and earn the game's currency: "bonks." Bonks are used to unlock the other four areas. To know what to shoot, viewers follow many categories, like art, goth, dog outfits and more. Weather and time changes allow you to choose a rainy day, a sunset or a night scene.

Your camera is very robust from the start, but bonks can also unlock different types of filters and lenses to capture different kinds of aesthetic photos. You can even use selfie mode to capture both you and the pups together, or use the flash bulb for night photos. The film shuffler sets a random shot up for a surprise.

In order to get the shot you want, you can pet the dogs and they will follow you for a period of time, or you can use an item for an effect. Items like the boombox – which makes all the dogs in the vicinity dance and jump to the beat – can be found in the vending machine for free. A wind-up music box puts all the dogs around you to sleep, while using the frisbee or stick item can get the dogs to chase.

The areas are fun to photograph in. Lighthouse Cove has cute pups swimming, Buppy Boardwalk has puppies doing tricks on skateboards and Muttropolis is where you can find dogs spending time in the city park. Mellowstone has dogs in minecarts or playing in the geysers, and when you complete all the tasks in all the areas, you can take your pups to the moon to experience zero gravity! There are more tasks on the moon, and you'll need the UFO mode to take pictures from places like the gas station and . . . diner? Make sure to snap a pic of a pup with the satellite or the Earth in the background!

While the game is fun, movement can be slow. Tasks can also be hard to understand, not giving you enough info to be able to understand the goal. The art style is cute, but the blockiness curbs the cuteness somewhat. Also, having to find random dogs instead of just spawning the ones you want to see was a letdown, but finding the "Golden" retrievers was fun.

If all of this has captured your interest, I'd still recommend waiting for a sale to come along before making your purchase of Pupperazzi, as the $20 asking price is a bit steep for the amount of content available. **– IAN**

SWITCH PUBLISHER: KITFOX GAMES DEVELOPER: SUNDAE MONTH RATING: E

Four-Color Fruit Quest

MELON JOURNEY: BITTERSWEET MEMORIES

SWITCH PUBLISHER: XSEED GAMES DEVELOPERS: FROACH CLUB & POPPY WORKS RATING: T

WHILE IT MAY not have flashy graphics and an abundance of mechanics, the adventure you take in Melon Journey: Bittersweet Memories is by no means fruitless. This story-focused indie game provides an intriguing, albeit short, experience with presentation and gameplay that will take you back to the days of the Game Boy.

In Melon Journey, you assume the role of Honeydew, who must find her best friend Cantaloupe after he goes missing from their job at a melon soda factory. Much of the gameplay involves exploring areas in the factory and around the nearby Hog Town, talking to characters you meet along the way and helping them out via sidequests. These tasks showcase Melon Journey's greatest strengths!

For one, its presentation is incredibly charming, from the green hues of the setting to the adorable anthropomorphic character designs to the lo-fi soundtrack. It genuinely felt relaxing to dive into for the three days I spent playing. It took me around five hours to complete Melon Journey, and that includes all the side content.

Also, the characters and their eccentric personalities stole the show. Some highlights include Ham Ghost Jr., a young hamster who is equal parts spooky and hilarious; Thievery Snake, the cool leader of neighborhood gang The Cavity Crew, and Ocean Pup, a fun-loving dog whose side story provides one of the sweetest scenes overall.

My favorite part of the game involved speaking to these characters as many times as I could and seeing their arcs progress throughout the story.

As its title suggests, Melon Journey isn't all sweet, however. The game tackles some serious themes.

For one, the melon soda factory severely overworks its employees, and the game doesn't sugarcoat it. You'll see some of the adorable character sprites passed out from exhaustion as you return to the factory a few times throughout the story.

Also, melons are seen as an illicit material within Hog Town, and the city's upcoming election includes a fair amount of corruption and intrigue surrounding the fruit's potential legalization.

These issues really hooked me into Melon Journey's narrative, but unfortunately, it's also where I found some problems. Melon Journey's story and lore is explained through its many characters, so talking to them provides needed context.

I tried to do that as much as possible, but even so, there were parts of the story that weren't explained well. For example, the game takes a bit of a dark sci-fi turn about two thirds in. What could've been a neat twist fell flat for me because it lacked a clear build up and explanation.

The story also felt rushed at the end as it tied everything up. I think the game would have benefited from a slightly longer playtime to flesh out the story and provide more satisfying answers to its mysteries.

Despite a few shortcomings, Melon Journey bears enough fruit for a solid adventure game, so long as you don't mind that it's short and (bitter)sweet! **— MAGGIE**

7.0

Snowstorm Symbiosis

BLANC

COOPERATIVE PLAY MAY not be a new gaming trend, but only in recent years have certain titles embraced co-op as their sole focus – thank Hazelight Studios' lauded multiplayer hits A Way Out and It Takes Two in particular for proselytizing on the merits of the buddy system! Such examples demonstrate how having a partner riding shotgun can evolve even the most straightforward trials in ways nobody could have expected.

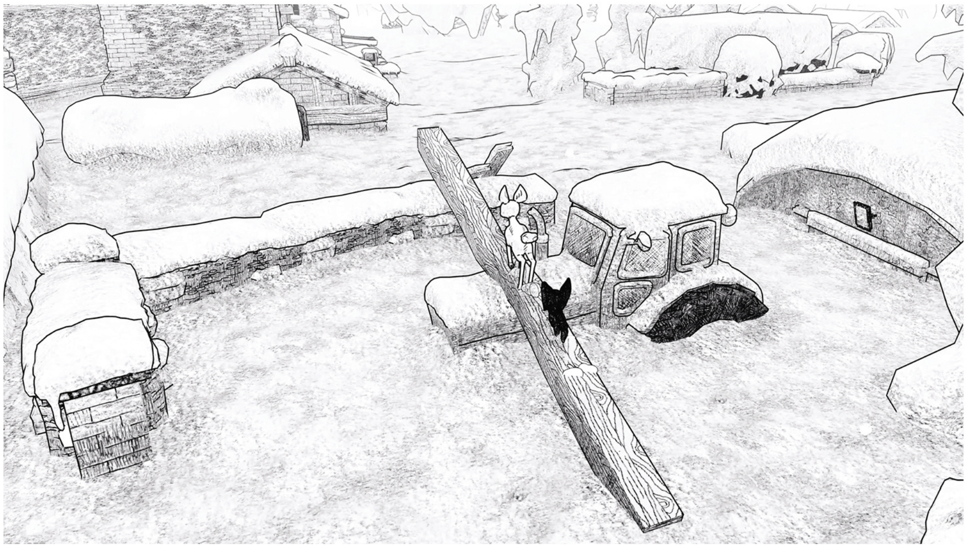
At first blush, Blanc seems to possess a similarly profound brilliance. Here's the tale of a young fawn and wolf pup, separated from their families in a most violent snowstorm, thrust into a timorous alliance that blossoms into a heart-melting friendship as they seek their lost loved ones. The striking monochrome palette, rough charcoal pencil outlines that give form to every frostbitten tree branch and use of negative space to evoke tranquility one moment and anxiousness the next are all so hauntingly beautiful that you can't help but shed a tear.

The woodland pair collaborate to solve environmental puzzles, each making up for what the other lacks. For instance, the fawn's longer legs allow for greater jumping height, while the pup's smaller build is perfect for squeezing through narrow passages. The first few chapters introduce basic cooperative strategies, then once you've grown acquainted with your tandem needs, you employ your skills to assist additional parties. Just try to remain stoic while preventing the blistering winds from impeding a waddle of adorable ducklings attempting to reunite with their mother!

Naturally, two local or online players independently operate the fur pals, but even lone wanderers can tackle the powdery landscape with a pair of Joy-Cons (or a Pro Controller), using the left and right sticks and shoulder buttons to issue respective commands. Though this setup certainly works well enough, it's easy to get your mental wires crossed when the critter you lead with your left hand trespasses onto the right half of the screen and vice versa. Of course, as Blanc has been crafted as a partner exercise, you do lose the emergent outcomes that arise when two people share in the journey.

Knowing full well that my solo playthrough possibly colored my experience in slightly duller hues, I don't believe that "profound brilliance" mentioned earlier ever really materializes. Puzzles aren't so much taxing or thought-provoking as they are minor speed bumps, resulting in less a harrowing adventure and more a picture book ride-along that ends after a few brief hours. The only rough patch is perhaps the chapter with the goat kids that mimic the fawn and pup's actions, during which my game softlocked when the goats somehow grew bored of doing the copycat routine.

I can't say how much different my impressions would have been with a co-pilot, but even without, I did have a lovely time guiding my animal companions. Their playful reactions to the smallest of accomplishments and discoveries are so expressive that you can truly sense their love and trust in one another. I suppose there's a tinge of color in Blanc after all! **– TONY**



SWITCH PUBLISHER: GEARBOX
DEVELOPER: CASUS LUDI
RATING: E

The Penultimate Portion of the Pass

MARIO KART 8 DELUXE: BOOSTER COURSE PASS – WAVE 5

WE'RE ROUNDING THIRD and heading toward home now, as the second-to-last wave of Booster Pass content for Mario Kart 8 Deluxe has now gone live in the game. As usual we've been given eight new tracks spread across two new cups, but in addition to that, we've also received three new playable characters!

Returning from the GameCube's Mario Kart: Double Dash!! is Petey Piranha, the massive plant monster. Making an encore appearance from Mario Kart 7 is Wiggler, the yellow, flower-headed caterpillar (who sometimes turns red with rage). Both of them are great to see back, but my favorite is the third new arrival: Kamek the Magikoopa! Kamek was originally supposed to be a part of the racer roster all the way back in 1997 in Mario Kart 64. He ultimately got cut, though, so we've had to wait over 25 years for this console debut!

Each of the three new racers has their own quirks, like Wiggler really turning red after getting hit by an item and Kamek's horn sound being the same as his cackling laugh from 1995's Yoshi's Island. They don't have much of an impact on gameplay, though – we'll have to wait until Mario Kart 9 to see if Nintendo will decide to give the characters more individuality in that area again.

Speaking of the sequel that seems like it will never arrive at this rate, it may be getting some of the better new track designs behind the scenes (if it's already in development), because Wave 5's selection feels a little wimpy. These are not the series' top-tier tracks.

There are three more real-world city tracks brought over from Mario Kart Tour, including Los Angeles Laps and Vancouver Velocity, which both exited my brain mere seconds after I crossed their finish lines. More visually interesting is Athens Dash, since Athens is such an ancient city and it's filled with crumbling stone ruins instead of bland, boring city blocks of modern design. (Even still, it's all kind of muddy and same-looking across multiple laps.)

Also disappointing is Sunset Wilds from Mario Kart: Super Circuit. Its original version from over 20 years ago had an actual sunset, with the sun dipping below the horizon as you raced and the final lap ultimately taking place in the middle of the night. This new version erases that, keeping the sun locked in place for all three laps. It's pretty, sure. But it's not an accurate remake of its source material.

Moonview Highway and Koopa Cape are back from Mario Kart Wii, and the fun factor his high on both of them – swerving around Bob-omb cars and hitting boost panels on the Highway and flying up to grab items hovering above half-pipes in the Cape are both great. Thumbs up.

Daisy Cruiser from Double Dash!! is fine (it was just never all that amazing in the first place). The final track, though, is a stand-out. Taking place in an enormous bathroom, Squeaky Clean Sprint has you racing through a sink, plunging into a tub and going down its drain and flying over a massive toilet while dodging toothbrushes, bottles of shaving cream and wheel-slicking puddles of spilled soap. It's one they could've saved for MK9 (and could've easily been Pikmin-themed with its scale, too), but I guess they had to give us one great one to offset the stinkers in the rest of this set! **– LUCAS**

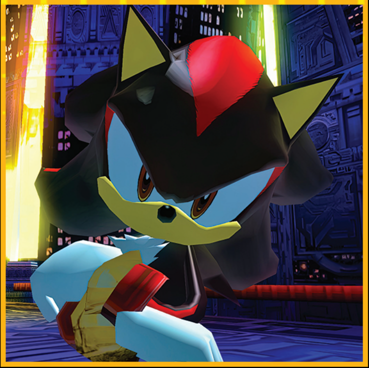
8.0

DLC PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER: NINTENDO RATING: E

BY JONATHAN HOLMES

BREAKING THE SONIC CYCLE

For decades, the Sonic series has been circularly celebrated and slammed. It goes like this: A new Sonic game is announced, fan hype goes through the roof for it, the final product then disappoints everyone and the cycle starts over again from the beginning. But is that really a fair assessment of every Sonic the Hedgehog release since the Dreamcast days? Let's look back across the series, generation by generation, to reflect on which games managed to break the Sonic Cycle!



Sega Goes Third-Party

Dreamcast, PS2, Xbox & GameCube

AS THE WORLD prepared to enter the 21st century, Sonic the Hedgehog was in a pretty good place. Throughout the '90s, he enjoyed four hit mainline games, three cartoons, an anime OVA and a comic book that showed no signs of slowing down, whether there was anything else to support it or not.

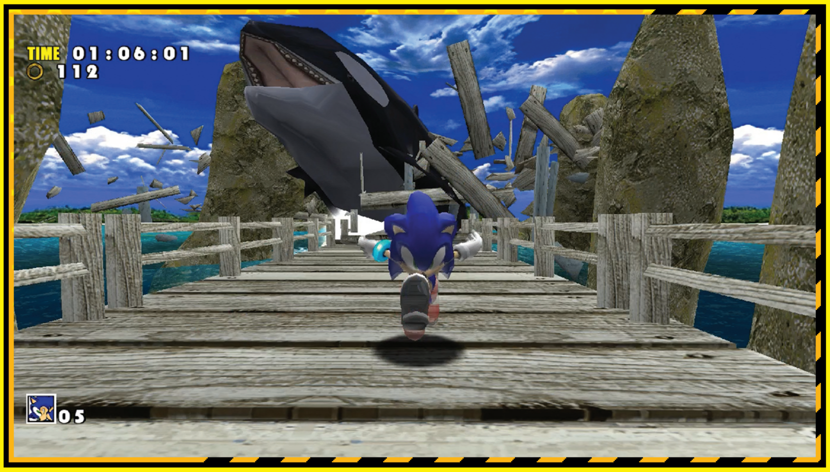
While Sonic sat out from having any sort of "mainline" presence on the Sega Saturn, the Dreamcast was another story. On 9/9/99, the hotly anticipated Sonic Adventure arrived with the launch of the console, marking the Blue Blur's first "true" transition to 3D. While some people had some issues with things such as the camera or the game's structure, which spread the action out across six differently playing characters (Big the Cat's slow-paced fishing tended to draw most of the ire), the game was generally lauded by fans and critics alike.

Sonic Adventure 2 would soon follow in 2001, and that's where things start to slip a little. It scored well on the whole, if not quite as well as its landmark predecessor. Players were mixed when it came to some of the streamlining Sonic Team had applied to the Sonic Adventure formula, which included dividing the game's story into "Hero" and "Dark" versions, each of which would switch between three characters who had an opposing equivalent in the other story. Two new characters added to the Sonic lore, the Dark story's Shadow the Hedgehog and Rouge the Bat, would prove to be enormously successful.

Then came an event no one saw coming: Less than two years after launching their latest console, Sega threw in the towel. They left the hardware business and went third-party, creating games for those who were once their competitors, including Nintendo.

Sonic Adventure 2: Battle arrived on the GameCube just after the console's launch, and was soon followed by Sonic Adventure DX: Director's Cut. While both rated lower than their Dreamcast originals, Sonic Adventure 2: Battle was the #1 selling title on Cube in its first week, and ultimately moved over 2,500,000 copies!

This paved the way for the first new console iteration of Sonic since the Dreamcast, Sonic Heroes, which abandoned the Adventure formula entirely in favor of team-based campaigns, much to the chagrin of some. Finally, the generation closed out with the series' first truly critically panned game, Shadow the Hedgehog, which set out to put the "edge" in "hedgehog." **— DAVID**



The Cycle Truly Begins
PS3, Xbox 360 & Wii

SHADOW THE HEDGEHOG wound up being the first widely panned Hedgehog adventure since the franchise took to 3D, but one could (and some did) argue that since it was technically a *Shadow* game and not a *Sonic* game, it didn't count. With that, Sega had the opportunity to take advantage of gamers' grace in the next generation of consoles, and they sought to do that by rebooting the series for the HD generation.

The seventh generation had perhaps more Sonic titles than any other, with a whopping eight on consoles alone. And if the Sonic Cycle didn't begin in the previous generation, then it definitely started and was canonized here.

It all began with the reboot that wasn't a reboot after all: The franchise's prestige black hole that was a Titanic Hindenburg of a Krakatoa known just as "Sonic the Hedgehog" – or "Sonic '06" to its friends (mostly YouTubers who analyze, critique and play the beleaguered title ironically). There's not even enough room to scratch the surface of what went wrong here, except to say part of it was its Wii counterpart, Sonic and the Secret Rings, which fared better with critics. However, that might have simply come as a result of putting the two side by side.

Sonic Unleashed promised to restore the series to its former glory by showing off speed-based platforming as Sonic in the early goings, before turning the lights out on expectations with the inclusion of the brawling Werehog. Interestingly, while the initial reception was mixed, the game has grown on fans over the years. The same can't be said for Sonic and the Black Knight, a somewhat more traditionally controlled sequel to Secret Rings that arrived lukewarm, and stayed that way.

With Sonic's brother-in-blue Mega Man getting back to basics two years prior in Mega Man 9, he tried to do much the same in Sonic the Hedgehog 4: Episode I, which excited fans with the promise of picking things up where Sonic & Knuckles left off years ago – but things quickly cooled off as Sonic's modern design and a more New Super Mario Bros.-styled take became apparent. Its second episode took criticisms to heart, but still failed to impress, with *some guy* at IGN giving it a 6.5.

Nevertheless, Sonic Team had something special with the new Boost formula that debuted in Unleashed, and released two more games based around that. Sonic Colors was a fan favorite for years, while Sonic Generations is still considered a classic! **– DAVID**

Missteps to Mania

PS4, Xbox One & Wii U

THOUGH THE DIGITAL download-only Sonic 4 releases could *charitably* be described as coming up short, surely the success of the Boost formula in Sonic Colors and Sonic Generations meant that the dark ages were over, right? Nothing but blue skies, green hills and gold rings from here, yeah? Unfortunately, the eighth generation of consoles failed to maintain the momentum that Sonic Team had captured for a brief moment in the twilight years of the preceding consoles.

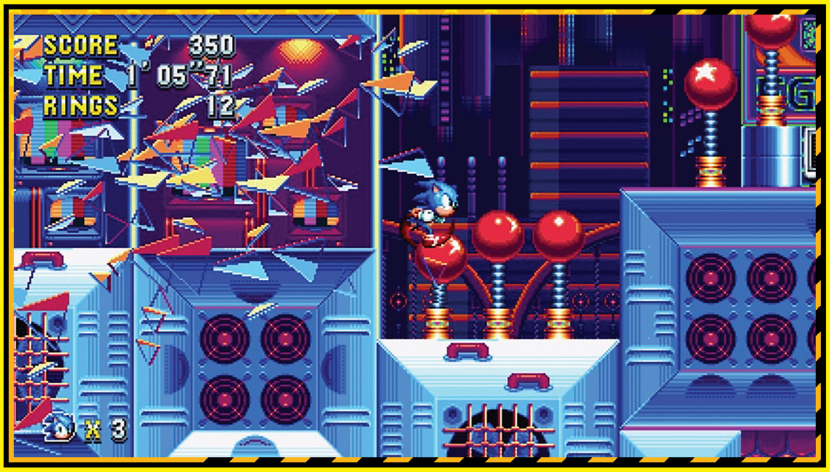
Sega entered into an exclusivity deal with Nintendo that produced several titles for Wii U and 3DS. The first of these, Sonic Lost World, abandoned the Boost formula that had been working so well for Sonic up to this point. Instead, Sonic Team was out to try to win over Mario fans with a 3D platformer that drew comparisons to Super Mario Galaxy. Its new control scheme with a parkour system was a point of contention, as were some design decisions and the inclusion of the villainous Deadly Six. The post-launch restoration of the classic "1-Up for 100 rings" mechanic and the addition of Zelda-themed DLC helped make up for those missteps. Overall, Lost World showed promise, but not enough out of the gate for Sonic Team to ever revisit it.

On the other side of the coin was Sonic Boom: Rise of Lyric, a game that tied into a new splinter direction for the brand. Interestingly, this flipping of Sonic conventions also flipped the Sonic Cycle on its head: Initial reactions were largely negative, but the more people saw, the more people warmed up to it . . . well, the cartoon, that is. The two-player co-op beat-'em-up adventure never garnered anywhere near the affection the brilliant animated series achieved.

Then things went dark. No, not Shadow the Hedgehog dark, but 2015 and 2016 saw the first complete home console absence of Sonic since 1998. But there was a light at the end of this tunnel!

At San Diego Comic-Con 2016, Sega debuted a trailer for Sonic Mania, a true return to the old-school Genesis Sonic fans loved and missed. Developed by ascended fans Christian Whitehead and Headcannon, Mania became the highest-rated Sonic game in the last 15 years!

The same could not be said for Sonic Forces three months later, which seemed to bank too much on the popularity of Sonic Generations, and never really managed to generate significant hype in the shadow of its crowd-pleasing, retro-flavored sibling. — **DAVID**



In Recent Years

PS5, Xbox Series X/S & Switch

BOTH SONIC FORCES and Sonic Mania managed to straddle the line of console generations, appearing around the midway point of the PlayStation 4 and Xbox One lifespans, but early on in the Switch's. In fact, Sonic Mania was even shown at preview events for Nintendo's then-upcoming hybrid handheld-console! Incidentally, it was also at this point that the two paths for Sonic converge.

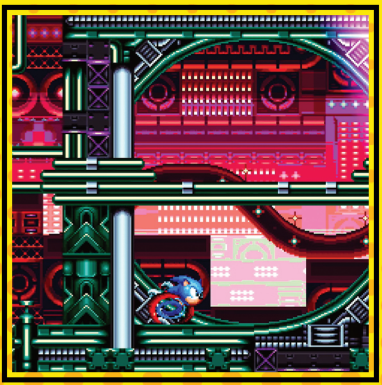
Following Sonic Forces' lukewarm reception, things mostly went dark again. Mania got an upgrade to Sonic Mania Plus in 2018, making a great game even better (word to Mighty and Ray, yo), and 2019 saw the release of Team Sonic Racing, but that was it. 2020 was another Sonic-less year, but 2021 brought a multiplatform remake of the formerly Wii-exclusive Sonic Colors as Sonic Colors: Ultimate.

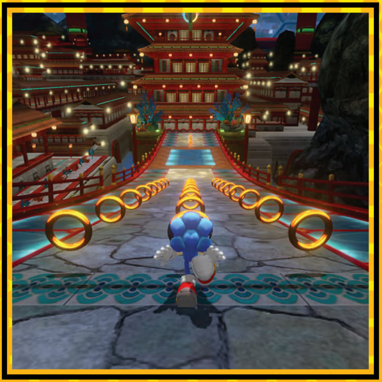
Despite its name, Ultimate left a lot of fans mixed. Some issues came from the port itself, like cutscenes not translating to 3D as well as the in-game visuals, while others argued that the original wasn't that good to begin with, and that the new version didn't do enough to improve upon it. Perhaps the plaudits heaped upon the original following its release was more a testament to the state of the Sonic franchise at the time than to its own merits?

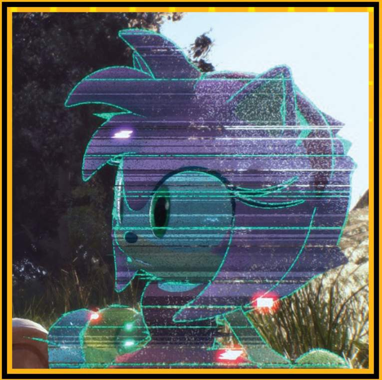
This actually echoes earlier grievances with Sonic rereleases on newer hardware. Some felt that Sonic Adventure and SA2 on GameCube were downgrades from the Dreamcast originals, and that the Xbox 360 and PS3 ports were even worse still. This has left fans clamoring for a full remake of the games, something more in line with the Crash Bandicoot N. Sane Trilogy. In any case, at this point, it began to look like Boost was Bust. Fortunately, Sonic Team had something else up their sleeves.

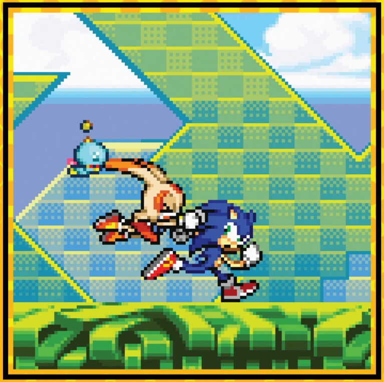
The most recent release in the series, Sonic Frontiers, has taken Sonic open world . . . er, "Open Zone." And in the process, it seems Sega's flipped the Sonic Cycle yet again. Initial showings were incredibly poorly received, but as more was revealed and more people got to play it for themselves, the more people started to get behind what they were seeing. Sure, it may not have achieved "peak Sonic" status, but overall, impressions grew to be anywhere from fair to positive toward this new approach to Sonic.

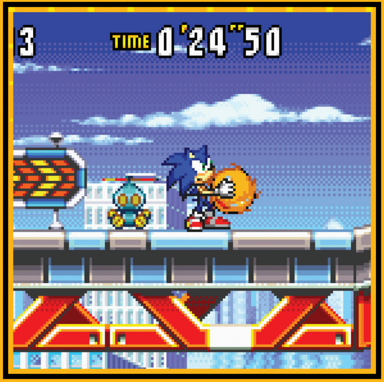
Looking toward the future, Sonic Team seems to be planning to expand on Frontiers with fan feedback, including multiple characters, fewer reused stages and a stronger story. — **DAVID**











On the Portable Side

NGPC, GBA & N-Gage

THE ANNOUNCEMENT THAT Sega was bringing their mascot to Nintendo's ecosystem was a watershed moment for the formal rivals. But in early 2002, as hungry Western fans eagerly awaited Sonic Adventure 2: Battle for GameCube, the speedy rodent's first original entry on competing hardware actually appeared on Game Boy Advance.

Sonic Advance was a contradiction. At long last there was a portable adventure with the same sense of speed and scope as the Genesis classics, but released on a Nintendo machine? Outrageous! Platform culture shock aside, the game's quality was high enough to pacify concerns that Sonic's third-party transition would be less than smooth. It further cemented its status as a major franchise milestone by featuring Amy Rose as playable in a 2D sidescroller, two full decades ahead of her appearance in Sonic Origins Plus!

Sonic Advance was developed by neither Sonic Team nor the regular Sonic Game Gear studio Aspect, but instead by Dimps, a new company formed by ex-SNK staffers with prior experience in bringing the Blue Blur to a non-Sega handheld. That game was Sonic Pocket Adventure, a 1999 Neo Geo Pocket Color adaptation of Sonic 2 with music from Sonic 3, character designs from the Dreamcast era and a conga line of original Eggman boss mechs. And the wildest thing? Pocket Adventure became one of the most critically acclaimed entries in the entire franchise, and most have likely never heard of it!

The handheld line was in good hands with Dimps. They followed up in 2003 with Sonic Advance 2, introducing Cream the Rabbit and her attack Chao, Cheese, for an even wilder control style than those of the returning four, and leaning more heavily toward the high-speed Boost gameplay that would become their trademark. Then the year after heralded Sonic Advance 3, a sprawling (or bloated) finale best remembered for its fun team mechanic that allowed you to pair up any two heroes and gain access to unique partner abilities.

Though the Advance trilogy was largely GBA-exclusive, the first game did get ported to the ill-fated N-Gage in 2003. Rebranded as Sonic N, it was a nearly flawless conversion — except for the vertical screen that made anticipating incoming obstacles nigh impossible. You could access landscape orientation via letterbox mode, though doing so shrank the viewing window's dimensions to those of a postage stamp. Understandably, Sonic never graced the N-Gage again. — **TONY**

What's the Rush?
PSP & DS

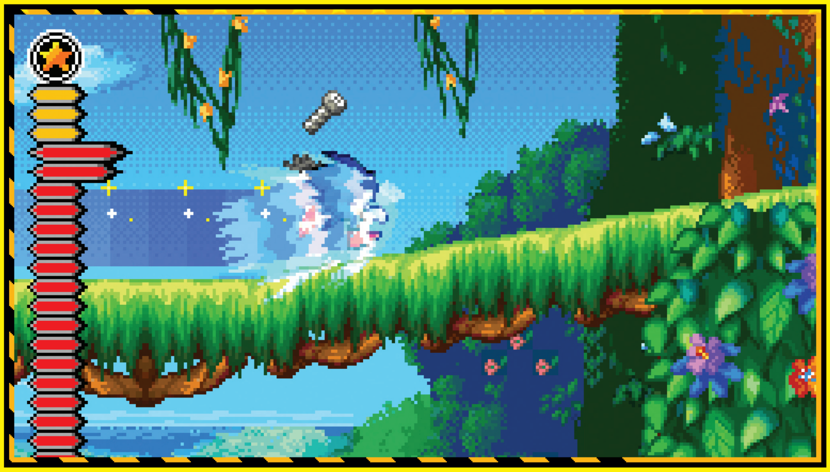
DIMPS HAD A pretty good rhythm going, able to crank out a new 2D Sonic title once every year with no significant dips in quality — but this cadence would be tested with the arrival of the touch-enabled Nintendo DS and its exotic twin-screen setup. What gimmicky shenanigans would be foisted upon our blue dude with the 'tude? Not too many, thankfully!

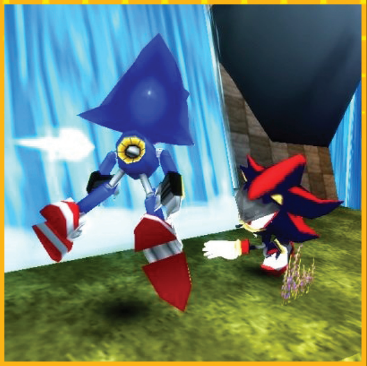
Stepping up in 2005 was Sonic Rush, which used the second screen predominantly for an expanded vertical view and limited touch usage to Special Stages. Sonic was joined by yet another new playable character, Blaze the Cat, who stood out from the usual cast as a pyrotechnic with a paradoxically cool disposition. The experimental soundtrack was also a huge highlight — Hideki Naganuma, best known as the composer for Jet Set Radio, brought his style of funky urban mashups to deliver one of the best scores, if not *the* best, in the entire franchise.

However, the game's most influential feature was the Boost Gauge, the final evolution of the high-speed mechanic first introduced back in Sonic Advance 2. By tapping into the Gauge, our dual champions would immediately dash at top speed and demolish any enemies in their path, thereby addressing the long-standing series flaw of punishing players for, ya know, running really fast. Though Rush's implementation was by no means perfect, the function was received well enough to encourage Sega to incorporate it into later 3D titles and kick off the Boost Era.

With Sonic Rush Adventure two years later, Dimps simply ironed out the kinks from before and streamlined the rest — only to bog down the pacing with watercraft sequences that required you to craft vehicles using materials found within stages. Then for the DS version of Sonic Colors, which was essentially Sonic Rush 3 in all but name, they implemented the Wisps and gave the expanded Sonic cast cameos as NPCs. All in all, another solid Sonic handheld trilogy — though dedicated fans were beginning to express fatigue with the Dimps formula.

But what about PlayStation Portable during the Rush festivities? Sega only saw fit to greenlight two Sonic titles on Sony's handheld. Developed by the now defunct Backbone Entertainment, Sonic Rivals and Sonic Rivals 2 were strange racing/sidescroller hybrids that critics and fans merely found serviceable at best. Sega was clearly too entrenched in their newfound romance with Nintendo to give the PSP serious thought . . . — **TONY**





Dimps Dips

Vita & 3DS

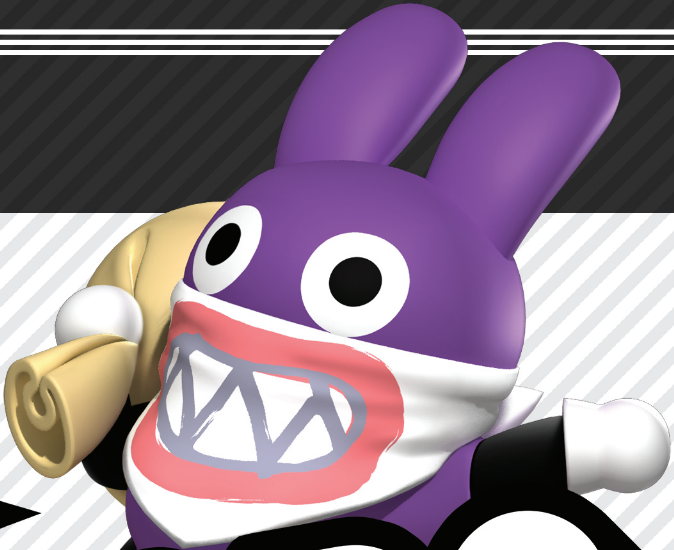
. . . AND SURE ENOUGH, Sega cared even less for PlayStation Vita! Sonic's only appearance there was Sonic & All-Stars Racing Transformed, a straight port of the home console version. I mean, 3DS received a Transformed port as well, but at least it had other original titles for variety! (Unfortunately, said variety was not much to speak of.)

After 10 years of consistent handheld releases, cracks had begun forming in Dimps' metaphorical dam. When they took point on the 3DS edition of Sonic Generations, that dam finally burst. Modern Sonic's campaign played much like the Rush games, which is to say it was presented from a 2D perspective and therefore erased the biggest distinguishing feature between it and the Classic half. Meanwhile, Classic Sonic's Genesis Era stages literally reused the same layouts from the source games. Most disappointing of all, Dimps squandered the opportunity to feature Zones from Sonic's portable history, with the sole exception being Water Palace from Rush.

I do wonder what could've been the reason for this abrupt decline in passion and creativity. Were they stretched too thin? Were there too many simultaneous projects? Did the dire response to Sonic 4: Episode I sour them on all future franchise developments? Whatever the reasons, they were enough to convince Dimps to drop 2D entirely and embrace the third dimension for Sonic Lost World on 3DS. Much like their PS2/Wii take on Sonic Unleashed, Lost World closely resembled its Sonic Team-led counterpart, except with altered stage designs. None of the changes, however, could salvage the problematic parkour system or unappealing new villains, the Deadly Six. This would sadly be the final Sonic game helmed by Dimps — but what came next would make players wish for a comeback sooner rather than later.

Sanzaru Games' Sonic Boom: Shattered Crystal may have been a better experience than its Wii U companion Rise of Lyric, but that's honestly not saying much. Despite the 3DS travesty's poor reception and poorer sales, it received a sequel subtitled Fire & Ice, which turned out decent. (So I've heard. I'll never play it.)

Sonic had a good run across two handheld generations, only to faceplant into the Mega Muck at the start of the third. Compared to his track record on home consoles, though, I'd say the Sonic Cycle was quite merciful along this branch of the timeline! **— TONY**



New No More

New Super Mario Bros.

WITH THE IMPENDING release of Super Mario Bros. Wonder, Nintendo will officially be moving on from the "New" era of Super Mario sidescrolling that has kept itself in the series' spotlight ever since 2006. That's the year when this game, the first New Super Mario Bros., launched on the Nintendo DS.

At the time, it was a bold new revival for the Mario brand. Nintendo's main man had been hopping and bopping in 3D for years with games like Super Mario 64 and Super Mario Sunshine, but his 2D sidescrolling adventures had been left in the past – it had been over 13 years since the last one, Super Mario Land 2: 6 Golden Coins, had launched in 1992. Over a decade's worth of absence had made Nintendo fans' hearts grow much fonder, fueled by NES and SNES Mario memories, and this game capitalized.

New Super Mario Bros. was a return to Mario's roots, with simple left-to-right, run-to-the-goal-pole game design informing most of its 80 levels of play. But the game was far from a rehash of old ideas, as it took the classic SMB games' foundations and built plenty of new scenarios on top of them – slower-paced, puzzle-packed levels, new movement ideas like having to edge slowly alongside thin cliff ledges and more all gave players something honestly New to see.

Not to mention the New power-ups! Mario could grow to massive size and kaiju-stomp his way through stages as Mega Mario, get super teeny-tiny to fit into the smallest of spaces as Mini Mario and don a blue Koopa shell to send himself spinning and ricocheting around as Shell Mario.

New Super Mario Bros. also brought 3D models into Mario's 2D gameplay, which put this branch of the franchise on the path of sameness and safety with its visuals that has become fans' chief complaint about it in recent years. But, at the time, it was truly eye-catching and, yes, New! **– LUCAS**

New Super Mario Bros. Wii

LISTEN, I TRIED my best. Honestly.

Nintendo revealed New Super Mario Bros. Wii back in 2009, at E3 2009, when I was still part of the IGN Nintendo team. It was just about the largest possible platform to have in Nintendo-focused game journalism in that era, so when the company pulled back the curtain on this NSMB sequel and it was revealed to star Mario, Luigi and two totally generic, completely identity-absent Toads, I fought back. I penned a piece called "Call to Arms: Name the Toads!" and published it on IGN, rallying the greater community of Big N fans to make a big stink about Players 3 and 4 in this new four-player adventure being saddled with the woefully basic and boring "Blue Toad" and "Yellow Toad." And it got a fairly good response! My favorite ideas that were sent in ended up being "Yvan" and "Wolley" – that's Navy and Yellow spelled backwards – but Nintendo, of course, never acknowledged those officially.

It might seem to be a silly thing to raise a ruckus about, but for me, Blue Toad and Yellow Toad represent everything wrong with the whole New Super Mario Bros. series – their lack of names, or any unique traits at all, just exemplify the soullessness driving this subseries. These games seem like they were made by Nintendo executives in a board room saying, "We need a Mario game on this system so it will sell X number of units this fiscal year." They don't seem like they were made by actual artists given any kind of opportunity for real creativity.

New Super Mario Bros. Wii was still a fun time thanks to its four-player simultaneous platforming, and it tapped into my nostalgia well by bringing the Koopalings back into the series after they'd been absent from the main Mario games for nearly two decades. And the Penguin and Ice forms were cool (literally!). But man, those poor Toads are still nameless to this day! **– LUCAS**

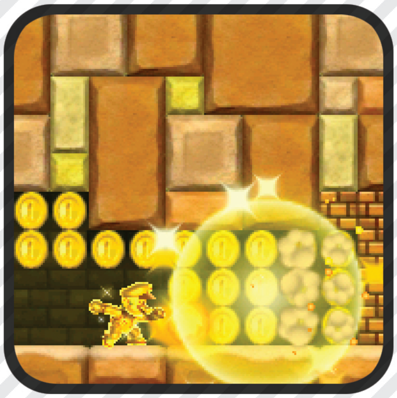
New Super Mario Bros. 2

HOW DO YOU keep New . . . new? Now that two games had been released under the New moniker, Nintendo needed a gimmick, and that gimmick was *gold!* The challenge set before players of New Super Mario Bros. 2 was to collect 1,000,000 coins. A global coin counter was also added to the game, informing players of worldwide collecting progress across everyone's save files (if SpotPass was turned on). The game would give you bonuses at certain global milestones, like 100,000,000 and beyond.

The Super Leaf returned from Super Mario Bros. 3 to once again let Raccoon Mario reach previously unattainable heights – usually to find more coins. Gold Rings would temporarily turn enemies golden, so Lakitu would throw coins, Bullet Bills and kicked golden shells would leave coin trails and every defeated enemy would produce coins. A new Gold Flower would give Mario golden fireballs that changed blocks into coins, and a Gold Block worn on his head would give Mario coins as he ran. Adding another 3DS and game card allowed dual play in levels with Luigi and Mario.

This is the first NSMB title to feature DLC as well, adding Coin Rush levels that strung three levels together to speedrun for yet more coinage. Given one life and a time limit, the goal was to grab as much gleaming gold as was good to gather!

The story was just another uninspired go-through-the-motions romp of saving Peach from Bowser, leaving the coin collecting to carry the title. The gimmick worked, as it was the fifth best-selling 3DS title, but it didn't save it from criticism for its low challenge and being too similar to its predecessors. The merch was great (golden figures of everyone!), but overall the game fell short of being great itself. It was pretty rewarding to finally get that 1,000,000th coin and earn a Gold Mario statue, though! **– BRETT**



New Super Mario Bros. U

NEW SUPER MARIO BROS. U arrived on the Wii U only a few short months after New Super Mario Bros. 2 hit the Nintendo 3DS. Fortunately, it managed to do just enough to stand apart from its predecessor.

The game starts by flipping the script: The previous three games basically set you out on your journey near Peach's Castle, but *this* time, the Koopa King's latest machination takes the opposite approach by hurling Mario and co. far off across the countryside, thus making Peach's Castle the game's final destination. (Don't worry, there are still items, and you don't have to use Fox).

Nintendo heeded the cries of those who missed the more interconnected landscape of Super Mario World, and brought a contiguous world map for our heroes to traverse, complete with shortcuts that allowed them to carry out their mission with greater haste. As players make their way back to the Princess' side, they'll get to witness as Bowser's Koopalings are deployed to stop them, and he renovates the Peachy palace into something a little more hot and molten.

The power-ups are something of a mixed bag. Only one new item, the Super Acorn, is introduced, allowing Mario to become Flying Squirrel Mario. While handy for platforming, it boasts no offensive capabilities, making it pale compared to the Super Leaf and Super Feather. On the other hand, all the items from New Super Mario Bros. and New Super Mario Bros. Wii are here, save for the Mega Mushroom, meaning you can still use the best suit of all, the Penguin Suit – better than any run-of-the-mill tux! Plus, three colors of Baby Yoshi are on hand to help, each with their own unique powers!

Throw in some extra game modes, and as it was originally released, NSMBU was poised to stand as the pinnacle of the New Super games, and *the* one to play if you had to choose. And yet . . . **– DAVID**

New Super Luigi U

LET US NOW once again turn our attention to the most momentous promotional period for Nintendo in the last four decades, the glorious Year of Luigi. With the Wii U having just been released the previous November, the Big N's grand plan to help their new console gain traction was to dedicate the entirety of 2013 to the Man in Green – with the centerpiece of that celebration being this game, which was sold both as a standalone Wii U disc at retail and also as DLC for New Super Mario Bros. U.

New Super Luigi U kicked Mario to the curb, promoting his taller little brother to the leading role. Luigi's signature higher jumps (with crazy flailing legs) were brought back out of the past, as was the old slippery traction that had first separated his style of play from Mario's decades earlier. Combined with each level's timer being set to just 100 seconds, New Super Luigi U was meant to be a tougher challenge for seasoned players.

Counterbalancing that boost in difficulty level was the introduction of Nabbit, a new playable character who couldn't be hurt by enemies! He could make direct contact with Goombas, Koopas, Spinies, whatever – he'd never take damage. Counterbalancing *that* was the fact that Nabbit couldn't use any of the power-up items in the game. He could gather them to exchange for bonus 1-Ups at the end of each level, but he could never transform into Super Nabbit or Ice Nabbit. Those forms stayed locked to Luigi and the two still-nameless tagalong Toads.

2013 ended up being a weak year for the Big N overall, as the Year of Luigi promotion didn't do much to move the needle toward Nintendo. But I still kind of love what they did with this release! I'd rank New Super Luigi U as my #1 within this subseries, since it dared to be bold and different and, dare I say, even a bit *creative*. That's more like the Nintendo I know! **– LUCAS**

New Super Mario Bros. U Deluxe

AFTER YEARS OF being accused of not being *new* enough, the New Super Mario Bros. series managed to squeeze out some surprises in its last hurrah. Like Mario Kart 8 Deluxe and many other Wii U-to-Switch ports, New Super Mario Bros. U Deluxe was mostly a repackaging of content that was already available on Nintendo's failed dual-screen home console. So on that front, "Old Super Mario Bros. U" might have been a more apt moniker.

But that would bely the freshness in the fact that, for the first time in a 2D platformer, NSMBU Deluxe allows you to play as Toadette! On the surface, adding her to the roster feels like a small cosmetic change: Her base moves and stats are the same as the others. Her differences come from her unique power-up, the Super Crown. It allows her to transform into Peachette, a Princess Peach look-alike who flaunts similar floaty abilities. While not quite as overpowered as the nigh-invincible Nabbit, Toadette/Peachette are the perfect pink pick for players who struggle with long jumps and do better with a slower, steadier fall speed.

But Peachette's biggest claim to fame came from the imaginative questions she inspired. Was Peach also a Toadette who acquired her own Super Crown in her youth? Had the puberty process of the Toad people finally been explained? Maybe not, as Nintendo later clarified that only Toadette can use the Crown, squashing hopes that Bowsette, Booette and all other non-canon Crown-created characters could someday become "real." (That said, in the magical world of fiction, anything's possible.)

So while the core game was anything but new, New Super Mario Bros. U Deluxe still sent the series off with a bang. Its breadth of content, depth of design and additions to the Mario mythos will keep players gushing about it for years to come. **– JONATHAN**

The New Super Mario Bros. series may not have been as flashy or imaginative as Nintendo's most hardcore fans would have hoped, but its overall vanilla flavor did serve an important purpose over the last two decades: It gave newcomers a safe, easy, unintimidating point of entry into Mario's sidescrolling adventures, and, beyond that, Nintendo's games as a whole. Everybody has to start somewhere, after all! Yesterday's players whose first Marios were New Super games may well be tomorrow's new hardcore fans!

BY LINDSEY LAYNE KING

SONIC SUPERSTARS

Sega presents a brand-new look for old-school Sonic sidescrolling!

MUCH LIKE THE path through one of the many Zones of Sonic's world, the road to Sonic Superstars has been a long and winding one.

As with all things Sonic, it began in 1991 with the original Sonic the Hedgehog for the Sega Genesis, the game that launched a multimedia franchise that has persisted in popularity to this very day. Four hit 2D platformers stood tall among a plethora of spin-offs and side games as the standard of excellence that defined what the series was all about.

Then came the Saturn era, where the franchise could be charitably described as "treading water," until 9/9/99, when a new era was born. Sonic was back, and Sonic was different. Sporting a new design, he made the jump into 3D and the 21st century.

But when Sega exited the hardware business and went third-party, they – in conjunction with Dimps – would bring this new style of Sonic back to a familiar style of 2D gameplay in Sonic Advance.

In most ways, Sonic Advance continued what was great about the 16-bit classics, but with new additions and a more Modern Sonic flair. But with each new title, the handheld 2D Sonics – in tandem with what was happening over on the home console side – moved further and further from their roots, resembling the progenitors of the series almost superficially.

That is, until 2010, when "Project Needlemouse" – a reference to the prototype phase of the character's early development – was revealed. But despite bearing the name "Sonic the Hedgehog 4: Episode I" upon its release, that new title wasn't what old-school fans of the series were looking for. It was still Modern Sonic playing in Modern Sonic ways, from the Homing Attack to Boost Pads to just feeling like it was *trying* to be retro without really nailing the retro feel. That the planned third episode was never released, leaving the story unfinished, should probably tell you all you need to know about how that went.

In 2011, Sonic Team would take a different approach. To celebrate the Blue Blur's 20th anniversary, past and present collided as the original Sonic was reintroduced to the world as "Classic Sonic," who played more (but not exactly) like his 16-bit self through HD recreations of fan-favorite stages,

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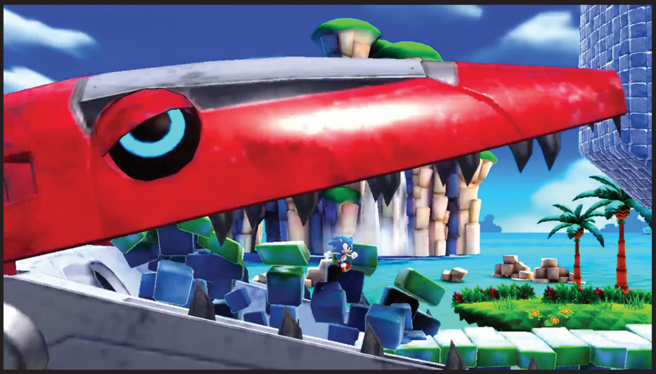
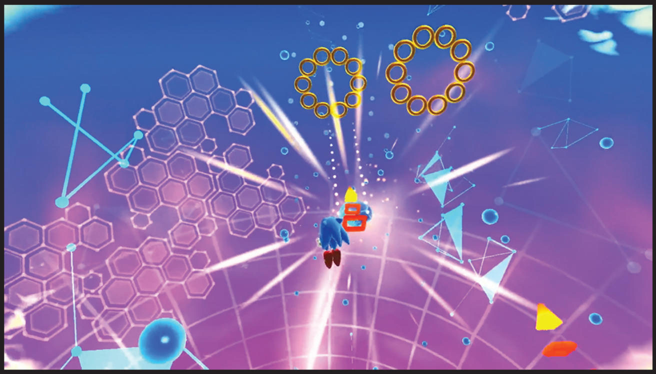




all in glorious 2D (while his counterpart, Modern Sonic, followed the mix of 2D and 3D found in the "Boost" style games, starting with Sonic Unleashed). It wasn't perfect, but it was enough to whet fans' appetites, and have them demand more Classic Sonic.

Around this time, a pair of fans-turned-pro developers named Christian "Taxman" Whitehead and Simon "Stealth" Thomley were porting some of those very same classics to modern hardware with their own Retro Engine, starting with Sonic CD. The updates were well received, though aside from CD, were limited to only the first two games, and to mobile devices. Fans wanted more.

In 2017, they got more! Taxman and Stealth were tapped to create a new title, and so Sonic Mania hit the scene with a visual style that looked like a more refined version of the Genesis classics, and played just the way fans remembered it. Fewer Boost Pads, and more rewarding momentum through remakes and updates of classic Zones, as well as all-new ones. Fans ate it up, critics loved it and it became the best-reviewed Sonic game since 2002.

Which begged the question: When would we get more? After all, with that kind of performance, what company would just let things sit and cool, rather than following up? There surely *had* to be a Sonic Mania 2 in the works, right? This *couldn't* just be a one-off, right? #HireThesePeopleSega!

But nothing did. Those who created Sonic Mania moved on to other projects, and hope that a follow-up would ever happen began to dwindle.

Until Summer Games Fest 2023! There, Sonic fans were treated to something new, yet different.

Sonic Superstars was revealed to the world! This new 2D platformer is based on the style of the old Genesis games, but doesn't look like those same games. Rather, its art style has been given a more modern aesthetic, closer to a 2.5D title. In fact, it looks more like a lot of the recent artwork for games such as Sonic Mania and Sonic Origins has leaped off the page and exploded into a fully animated version of itself!

That was emphasized by a bit in the debut trailer in which the Genesis Sonic races through the Emerald Hill Zone from Sonic the Hedgehog 2 and crosses a barrier to suddenly find himself in a new Zone, in the new style, zipping back and forth between the two before going on his way into this new world of adventure.

It's with that in mind that it's worth pointing out that one habit the developers won't be repeating this time is the reuse of old Zones from previous Sonic games. While some familiar Zone styling/theming may be used (think of the difference between Green Hill Zone and Emerald Hill Zone), this new game's 12 new Zones are all-new. Seven have been officially revealed so far, including Bridge Island Zone, Speed Jungle Zone, Sky Temple Zone, Pinball Carnival Zone, Lagoon City Zone, Sand Sanctuary Zone and Press Factory Zone. An eighth, so-far unannounced Zone (as of this writing) that's been sniffed out by Sonic fans would be the Golden Capital Zone. Could this be the yolk of Eggman's new empire?

Currently, the four playable characters set to bust some Badniks and put a crack in Eggman's plans are Sonic (of course), Tails (where Sonic goes . . .), Knuckles (naturally) and, fresh off her 2D Classic platforming playable debut (yeah, that's a lot of qualifiers; still crazy it took this long) in Sonic Origins Plus, Amy Rose!

What's more, Sega does what . . . Nintendo . . . already did . . . ahem. That is, all four characters will be playable together in simultaneous co-op play for up to four players! Unfortunately, it's local co-op only, likely because science has yet to develop a fiber quick enough to keep up with the Blue Blur *and* his fast friends, all at once.

Curiously, some characters have been confirmed to have second Acts of Zones that are exclusive to them. How this works with the multiplayer option is as-yet unknown, but Game Informer said they're "seemingly optional," with the game asking if you'd like to take on a hero's exclusive Act after clearing the preceding one. Solo players will also be able to change who they're using on the game's Generations-esque 2D world map. This may also include some alternate promotional versions of the characters, such as LEGO Sonic, and the option to dress Classic Amy in Modern Amy's outfit.

Team Sonic (not to be confused with Sonic Team) aren't the only familiar faces you'll find here, though. Somehow surprised at the excited reception to m'boys Mighty the Armadillo and Ray the Flying Squirrel in Sonic Mania Plus (hopefully they'll show up here eventually, too . . . Sonic Superstars Plus, anyone?), Sonic Team decided to bring another character back from the brink of obscurity.

Known previously as Fang the Sniper in Japan and Nack the Weasel elsewhere, it appears the character will henceforth be called "Fang the Hunter" going forward . . . or at least, until he needs to dodge the feds or something again. While maintaining a consistent presence in Sonic's Archie comics over the years, Fang has made little more than cameo appearances in the games since the late '90s, where he was often playable alongside the rest of the crew in titles ranging from Sonic Drift to Sonic the Fighters.

Fang isn't alone, however. He'll be joined in trying to thwart our heroes' progress by a newcomer known as Trip. A resident of the Northstar Islands the game is set on, she is a sungazer lizard who was hired by Eggman and Fang, and wears identity-concealing armor, perhaps on account of her clumsiness.

Naturally, the baddies are after the Chaos Emeralds, so it's up to our heroes to find them first. Only this time, you don't need a complete set in order to utilize their awesome powers! Each Chaos Emerald brings with it a unique "Emerald Power" for our heroes to take advantage of. Finally! Now, those of us who typically stink at Sonic Special Stages will have something to show for our hard work when we hit a wall after getting the second or third Emerald.

The Blue Chaos Emerald lets players use "Avatar" to summon an army of character clones to attack enemies; Cyan can activate "Water," which liquifies the player and allows them to climb waterfalls; "Bullet" is the Red Chaos Emerald's specialty, turning the player character into a fireball that can launch in any direction; the Green Emerald's "Ivy" ability lets players channel their green thumb, and grow a vine to reach new areas; Purple grants some ultraviolet "Vision," revealing items they can't normally see; Yellow echoes a stop-light by making everything "Slow" down; and the Grey Emerald unlocks an "Extra" move that's unique to each character. Sonic gets a Homing Attack, Tails can create a Tornado that sweeps enemies up off the ground, Amy channels her inner Hammer Brother and Knuckles . . . punches. Yeah, something about that just feels right.

As Superstars was announced, one of the first things people sought out was who was developing the title. Was Dimps making an Advance encore? Was the team behind Sonic Mania reuniting once again to see justice done to the high-speed hedgehog? Well, not for a lack of trying (when it comes to that last one), but as the head of Sonic Team, Takashi Iizuka, told VGC, those plans "fell through." (If you're curious as to what they're up to, flip ahead to Page 50.)

Instead, development chores are being handled by a name that should be familiar to Nintendo fans going some ways back: Arzest, the studio headed by none other than Sonic Team original and co-creator of Sonic the Hedgehog himself, Naoto Oshima.

Despite that considerable feather in his cap, hearing the name "Arzest," which was founded by key members of Oshima's previous studio, Artoon, knocked the wind out of a lot of peoples' sails. Between the two studios, one may recognize such works of theirs as Yoshi's Island DS, Yoshi's New Island, Hey! Pikmin and, most recently, as co-developer with Square Enix on Balan Wonderworld.

Yeah. For a brand with a reputation for under-delivering after a promising announcement, it's not the news a lot of fans were hoping for.

However . . . so far, word on the street is that Superstars appears to be good! Maybe even great! Perhaps even better? It probably helps that they seem to be taking fan feedback seriously, including a stricter adherence to the physics that made the original games (and Mania) so good.

This is coming from impressions taken from demos at events like Summer Game Fest, but so far, it's been getting a positive reception. Perhaps this could be taken as a sign that, if nothing else, Oshima knows his blue baby boy.

The music is practically guaranteed to be great, as Superstars' musical director is Jun Senoue, working in partnership with Mania's Tee Lopes!

It's been a long road, but hopefully the story of Sonic Superstars will be a saga for the ages. – **DAVID**

SUPER MARIO BROS. WONDER

Nintendo's bringing whimsy back into the wonderful world of Super Mario sidescrolling!

I REMEMBER MY first time seeing Raccoon Mario. It was during my first viewing of The Wizard, of course, in a crowded theater full of fellow video game-obsessed kids back in 1989. Our hero grabbed a leaf, sprouted a tail, dashed along the ground and then took flight, flapping his way up, up and away into the sky. The crowd went wild! It was wonderful.

I remember my first time seeing Yoshi. It was during a trip to Toys Я Us, in the months leading up to the launch of the Super Nintendo. They had a system hooked up to a TV in a glass case, unplayable but fully watchable – it had Super Mario World running, just looping over and over again through its attract mode, showing Mario hop on top of a hungry green dinosaur who lashed out his long frog-like tongue to eat a Pokey, one prickly cactus chunk at a time. Yoshi would finish his meal, run just a bit further, then the screen would fade to black and the whole thing would begin again. I must have watched it 20 times. It was, again, wonderful.

Those moments were back in the days when Mario was still so young and new, and had starred in so few games, that the potential for Nintendo to surprise and delight its audience with brand-new ideas and never-before-seen spectacles was still high. Just about anything he did was new and amazing! But these days, with the Super Mario series pushing 40 years old, it's easy to feel like we've kind of seen it all by now. Like there may be no more magic to be mined from this once-whimsical, wonderful world!

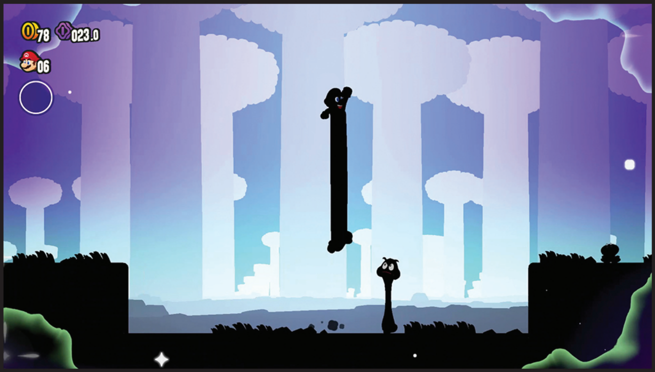
But I'm hopeful that's not true.

SWITCH PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER: NINTENDO RELEASE: OCTOBER 20, 2023 RATING: E

Super Mario Bros. Wonder has given me that hope, as after years of play-it-safe New Super Mario sequels, Nintendo seems to have once again allowed its world-class creators to create something truly new – and, hopefully, genuinely wonderful. This is a game that looks like it has real potential to make a permanent positive impact on the minds of those who play it! I hope my kids get to see sights while playing "Mario Wonder" that stick with them as fond childhood memories for decades to come. (I hope I still have the capacity to be awed myself, too!) So let's take a closer look at this upcoming adventure as I explain why I'm so optimistic!

REBUILDING THE BASICS

One of the pitfalls the Sonic series has fallen into over the years is altering Sonic's physics too severely from game to game, which has messed with the muscle memory of longtime fans. Mario's been more conservative in that regard, which has served him well.



So I don't expect Mario's movements to feel drastically different in this new game, gameplaywise – and yet they should feel entirely different from an emotional perspective, since Nintendo has reinjected joy into their hero!

Mario is smiling again! He's actually emoting as he runs and jumps. He hits a free-spirited, arms-spread-wide pose in mid-air after his longest leaps, like he's celebrating his success at soaring so high above the ground. It's instantly infectious and inviting after so many years of comparatively emotionless hopping and bopping.

That's my first source of hope that this game will really offer the wonder it proclaims in its name: Even the basics of Mario's sidescrolling style of play – the simplest running and jumping actions – have been reanimated and made much more mirthful.

And that mirth will be multiplied!

BRING YOUR FRIENDS ALONG

The New Super Mario Bros. series had its faults, but introducing four-hero simultaneous multiplayer was inarguably a great call. It's since become a standard on the sidescrolling side of the series (as well as in 3D World), and it's coming back again in Wonder.

There's a critical difference in this game, though: The heroes look like they will no longer collide with one another. So much of the New Super multiplayer experience was bouncing off each other's noggins, or picking up your pals to playfully hurl them into a pit and get them mad at you. Will all of those kinds of moments be absent here? If so, Wonder will feel different indeed. Maybe not worse – since you'd all be able to fully focus on conquering the enemies and obstacles as a team – but definitely different. Perhaps the option to activate collision with other players will still be available? So you can choose whether you want it on or not? We don't know for sure quite yet.

The jury's also still out on how the different characters will handle. The history of the Mario series is inconsistent on this point – sometimes all of the heroes run at the same speed, jump at the same height, and so on. Other times each character has their own unique abilities, like Luigi's leg-flailing high jumps or Peach's power to float through the air. The first look that Nintendo gave us at this game offers conflicting evidence for which direction Wonder will go. On one hand, all the core characters seem to be running and jumping at the same speeds and heights. On the other, we got a look at playable Yoshi, and he's definitely got access to his signature distance-boosting flutter jumps. Does that mean Yoshi will be the only one with unique movement, and all the rest will share the same skills? Like I said, we just don't know quite yet!

ENTER THE WONDERWORLD

No matter what the "normal" handling for each of the characters ends up being, it's all going to get thrown out the window when one of them touches a Wonder Flower. When that happens, the whole world morphs and shifts and gets kookoo crazy all around them – it's a different wild and wacky effect in every single stage, it seems, and you'll never be able to predict what you'll see next! Those are the kinds of moments that have really given me a lot of hope for this game's power to surprise us. I can't wait to get to a stage that Nintendo hasn't shown us any part of in a trailer or early screenshot, to be able to be truly taken aback by whatever Wonder effect takes place while playing!

We've been given a few glimpses at the potential insanity that awaits us. One Wonder Flower unleashes an avalanche of rotund rolling hippos that'll bounce the heroes around like those goofy donut-looking Bumpers in the Super Mario Maker games. Another turns out the lights in a silly forest full of stretchable trees, while Mario and his foes also gain the ability to extend and/or compress their own bodies. A Wonder Flower may cause a stampede of rhinos, or make an enormous snowball crash across the landscape, or make a spontaneous flood fill a previously dry area with water! Fingers crossed that we get truly shocking, unpredictably insane setpieces out of this whole Wonder Flower idea!

BATTLING BIG BOSSES

Nintendo's been tight-lipped about this game (as they always are), but a bit of text from the ESRB ratings website has pointed to boss battles potentially being larger, more epic affairs than normal. The New Super series kept most boss encounters contained to single-screen spaces, like hopping on a Koopaling's head three times in a small chamber. More wide-ranging, larger-scale fights were saved for final encounters with Bowser at the very end of each adventure. But now?

PACHYDERM POWER!

ELEPHANT MARIO

Well, Mario, it looks like you may have put on a few pounds.

While many of Mario's power-ups over the years have enhanced his mobility – giving him the ability to fly, or the agility of a cat, or the swimming speed of a frog – Nintendo's game designers seem to be going in the opposite direction with the all-new Elephant Mario. Here we have a hero who's slower than he was before he powered up! But the trade-off for his decrease in speed looks to be a considerable increase in fighting power.

Elephant Mario has no need to jump on the heads of his enemies to defeat them – he can simply amble right up to them and whack them out of his way with his powerful new trunk. The action has some similarity to his old spinning tail whip attack as Raccoon Mario, but Elephant Mario's Trunk Swipe (or whatever they end up calling it) might not be mapped to a button input – small enough foes might just be swept aside automatically when you touch them. We'll soon see!

Another big shift for this new form? Mario may not be able to jump when he's Elephant Mario! I haven't heard anyone else suggest that, but it's my personal guess: I think Nintendo's going to boldly remove the one power that's always been second nature to Mario – his jumping – to force players into brand-new kinds of platforming never before seen in this series. (Or I could be totally off! Again, we'll soon see!)

"Boss battles contain more involved combat against giant enemies that breathe fire and smash parts of the scenery." That's the text straight from the ESRB, and it makes it sound like we could be getting more endgame-tier encounters earlier than the final battle. "Involved combat" is particularly encouraging – the ESRB could be overselling it, of course, but if they're on the money, we could be in for some colossal clashes indeed!

ANIMAL ALTER EGOS

We know that things can get a little shapeshifty after our heroes touch a Wonder Flower, but aside from those temporary transformations, we may be about to be introduced to several new, more permanent ones by way of a fresh slate of power-up items. The first trailer for Mario Wonder ended with just such a tease, briefly debuting the new Elephant Mario form.

But does that mean we'll also be getting Elephant Luigi, Elephant Toad and more? Or are we looking at a kind of situation that's more akin to what we got with Toadette and the Super Crown in New Super Mario Bros. U Deluxe – where each hero gets his or her own unique item and associated personal transformation all to themselves? I'd wager the latter's more likely, even though the former would be easier to develop!

Perhaps Elephant Mario's equivalent for Luigi could be a giraffe form? Maybe Toad could transform into a tiger? Perhaps Princess Peach could be even prettier in pink in the form of a pink flamingo? These are all truly shots in the dark, but I like the general idea and the gameplay flow such one-character-only power-ups would encourage: All the heroes' base forms could run and jump with the same speed and stats, perhaps, but then the power-ups could be the things that set them apart as distinct from one another and make your choice on the character select screen actually mean something. I'd love to see the whole cast get their own new animal forms! (But if it is just elephants for everybody, I'll try to still enjoy that too.)

ALL WILL BE REVEALED . . .

As you can tell, as of this writing the Super Mario Bros. Wonder pre-release hype cycle is in the post-reveal phase of pure speculation – soon to be followed by a flood of new details that will surely be unleashed upon us during Nintendo's annual September Direct video. But I've said it before and I'll say it again: I love being in this "before" time of not knowing all the answers yet. Mario Wonder could still be anything right now! And enjoying these hopes and dreams for what the final game may contain is already more than wonderful. **– LUCAS**

SHANTAE ADVANCE: RISKY REVOLUTION

Shantae's lost GBA sequel has been uncancelled!

GOOD NEWS, EVERYONE! The long-cancelled WayForward title Shantae Advance: Risky Revolution is finally going to see a release!

The revolution isn't the only thing that's risky, though, as the bad news is that you're not going to be able to play it – that is, not unless you've got some 20-year-old original GBA hardware still kicking around somewhere. (And to be fair, there *are* other options, from the Game Boy Player to the original Nintendo DS and DS Lite to the more recent Analogue Pocket.)

The company is partnering with Limited Run Games to revive, restore and release this lost chapter of the Shantae legacy in the format it was originally made for: a physical Game Boy Advance cartridge. Original Shantae developers Erin Bozon (co-creator), Matt Bozon (series director) and Michael Stragey (programmer) are reuniting to get the job done, and they've even blown the dust off the ol' GBA development tools to ensure authenticity. And I hope you kept your Game Link Cables, because there's a four-player battle mode!

As the series progressed, it seems WayForward didn't pivot to account for the missing entry, so fans will finally get to see how Shantae first met many of her bizarre and unique friends in this installment. Expect numerous towns and labyrinths in multiple chapters with fierce bosses, six creature transformations and a soundtrack by lauded composer Maddie Lim! – **DAVID**

GBA PUBLISHER: LIMITED RUN GAMES DEVELOPER: WAYFORWARD RELEASE: TBA 2024 RATING: RP

ARZETTE: THE JEWEL OF FARAMORE

Philips would be proud!

REMEMBER THOSE ODD yet decent remasters of Link: The Faces of Evil and Zelda: The Wand of Gamelon from a couple years back? Remember when we briefly mentioned in our review that the remasters' developer, Seth "Dopply" Fulkerson, was also working on a spiritual successor to those original CD-i wares? (Yeah, I bet that last part slipped your mind.)

Well, *squadala!*

Developed with the financial backing of Limited Run Games, Arzette: The Jewel of Faramore is Seth's answer to the question nobody asked: "What if FOE and WOG were actually beloved games that went on to inspire copycats in the indie space decades later?" In this alternate timeline, Arzette promises to tickle fans' nostalgia with equally janky, low-res cutscenes and hand-painted environments that make character sprites stick out like a skin rash. The fanservice doesn't end there, as CD-i Zelda's background artist Rob Dunlavey, along with Link and Zelda's voice actors Jeffrey Rath and Bonnie Jean Wilbur, are also lending their talents to this tribute!

Given the reality of the source material, it's not hard to imagine that Arzette is one big troll, good for a sensible chuckle but not much fun to actually play. However, Seth and his team have promised that the CD-i inspirations are merely skin-deep. Great attention is being directed toward level design, controls and screen readability, hopefully resulting in an action platformer that achieves what its forebears woefully could not.

I'm . . . honestly excited for Arzette's release. Am I weird for feeling that way? – **TONY**

SWITCH PUBLISHER: LIMITED RUN GAMES DEVELOPER: SEEDY EYE SOFTWARE RELEASE: TBA 2023 RATING: RP

EDITOR'S NOTE: I'M SURE WAYFORWARD AND LIMITED RUN WILL ANNOUNCE A SWITCH VERSION OF THIS GAME IN THE FUTURE, BUT FOR NOW ONLY A GBA CARTRIDGE RELEASE IS CONFIRMED.

THE MAKING OF KARATEKA

A digital museum focused on a single exhibit.

CHANCES ARE YOU'VE heard of Prince of Persia. But have you ever heard of Karateka? It's the game that Jordan Mechner created first that laid the foundation for what would ultimately make Prince of Persia the classic it's become. Don't worry if you're unfamiliar, though! The folks at Digital Eclipse are about to teach you everything you need to know.

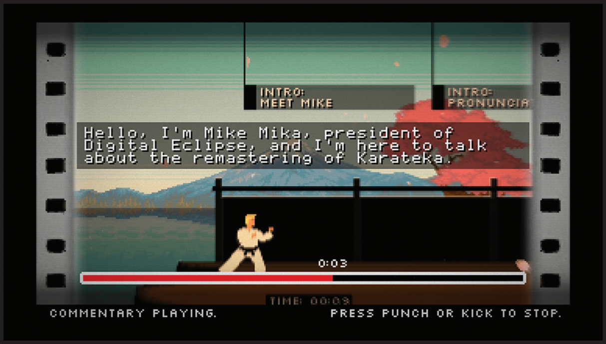
Following their success with Atari 50, Digital Eclipse has introduced what they're calling the "Gold Master Series." This effectively takes the interactive timeline concept from Atari 50 and applies it to individual releases, and the first game they're covering is the seminal classic Karateka.

The game casts players in the role of a martial arts master who sets out to rescue a princess. It put an unusual focus on story and atmosphere for a game of its time (1984), and while it never reached the levels of mainstream success that Mechner's later work eventually would, it's an incredibly important piece of gaming history that's being preserved and presented here with an unparalleled level of detail and context.

The Making of Karateka will include numerous versions of the game to play, as well as a new comprehensive remastered edition, a completed version of Deathbounce: Rebounded (an unpublished prototype twin-stick shooter also from Mechner) and loads of videos and images about how this legendary game came into existence.

The Gold Master Series sounds like an amazing step forward in telling the history of video games, and they couldn't have chosen a better game to start with than Karateka! **— KRIS**

SWITCH PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER: DIGITAL ECLIPSE RELEASE: SEPTEMBER 2023 RATING: T



DOUBLESHAKE

Mischief Makers 2!?

SKIES OF ARCADIA, Ghost Trick, Eternal Darkness, Drill Dozer, Zack & Wiki – all titles with fantastic franchise potential that never got the recognition they deserved. Sure, some received ports down the line, but proper sequels always seem to be out of reach.

My favorite one-and-done is easily Treasure's Mischief Makers, one of the scant few 2D platformers to appear on the 3D-focused N64. I love everything about it, from the creepy population of Ghostface lookalikes to the tokusatsu anthro warriors who served as primary antagonists. But most of all, I adored the unconventional combat mechanic of grabbing the nearest item, enemy or unsuspecting bystander and shake-shaking the fear of the hereafter into them!

So imagine my excitement during the recent Limited Run Games Summer Games Showcase when they announced DoubleShake would arrive on Switch in 2024!

Developed by Michigan-based Rightstick Studios, DoubleShake seeks to recapture the spirit of N64/PS1-era sidescrollers like Tomba and Klonoa, right down to the charmingly low-poly visuals. Our heroine Loam must defend her home of Caliko Archipelago with nothing but her quick reflexes and a propensity for shaking – shaking soda cans to send herself skyward like a rocket, shaking flowers to forcefully extend their stems across expanses, even shaking her hips as she gets lost in a sweet groove.

As you can see, chief among DoubleShake's inspirations is none other than Mischief Makers – could this actually be the spiritual successor I've long dreamed of? It's got the look and the sound down so far. According to its Kickstarter page, we can expect a properly meaty adventure featuring side-quests, fully animated cutscenes and a Chao Garden-inspired virtual pet mode. And speaking of Sonic influences, there will even be a song by the one and only Johnny Gioeli of Crush 40 fame! Live and learn (and shake), baby! **— TONY**

SWITCH PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER: RIGHTSTICK STUDIOS RELEASE: TBA 2024 RATING: RP

PRINCE OF PERSIA: THE LOST CROWN

The series returns to its sidescrolling roots!

HISTORY'S REPEATING ITSELF!

Nearly 40 years ago, Karateka went first, paving the way for the first Prince of Persia – now we'll get an echo of that same one-two punch in the months ahead, as shortly after Digital Eclipse reminds the greater gaming community about Jordan Mechner's trailblazing martial arts adventure, his more famous brand will also be brought back out of the past! The Making of Karateka hits Switch in September – this new Prince of Persia will follow in January.

It's echoing the past in more ways than just reflecting the old release schedule, though, as this new sequel is also presenting its action in the series' original point of view: 2D sidescrolling!

SWITCH PUBLISHER: UBISOFT DEVELOPER: UBISOFT MONTPELLIER RELEASE: JANUARY 18, 2024 RATING: RP

Prince of Persia: The Lost Crown is a brand-new take on Jordan's original idea. Like the oldest installments in this venerable franchise, it's focused on precision platforming through a world drawn straight out of Arabian Nights – but it's also embracing all things modern, applying several more decades' worth of game design polish and fresh ideas to that 1989 template.

For starters, the game world is going to be vast, fully interconnected and freely traversable in any direction – provided you've unlocked the right abilities to bypass some of the gate-keeping obstacles that will be placed in your way. Yes, Prince of Persia is going full Metroidvania, and I think that's a brilliant call. The game looks so fun and fluid in motion that I further think any fans of Metroid Dread would do well to give it a look. (While we wait for Samus' next 2D sidescrolling quest, of course.)

The movement tech and combat in The Lost Crown is giving me Dread vibes as well. New protagonist Sargon – who is not the titular Prince, but is rather a warrior who's been tasked with saving that Prince – dashes and dances around the screen with the same kind of elegance and fast reflexes as Samus. He can slide, dash, air-dash, attack with slices of his twin swords and pull a bow out of thin air to fire off arrows in an instant. The arrows have an extra function beyond just dealing damage to enemies, too: They can be ricocheted off ceilings and walls to hit targets at wild angles (and will even return to Sargon like a magical boomerang after finding their mark).

That's just scratching the surface of the unique ideas Ubisoft's packing into this adventure, which looks like a fine revival of a sleeping brand. Did you know the last Prince of Persia game launched over a decade ago? It's about time we got a new one! **– LUCAS**

SWITCH PUBLISHER: PRIVATE DIVISION DEVELOPER: EVENING STAR RELEASE: EARLY 2024 RATING: RP

PENNY'S BIG BREAKAWAY

Sonic Mania's developers are breaking free from 2D and embracing the third dimension!

AND NOW FOR a look at a game (and a dev team) that's heading in a totally different direction.

We've put the emphasis of this issue on 2D sidescrollers. Or 2.5D. The point is, they're keeping their action locked strictly to the left and the right. It's been fun to fixate on that fairly infrequent design decision since two of the top stars in the business, Mario and Sonic, just so happen to both be going back to those basics with new titles launching at around the same time. But just because two industry titans are working to steer the boat back toward sidescrolling doesn't mean that everyone's going to follow their lead! In fact, the most popular Sonic developers of the last decade are jumping ship.

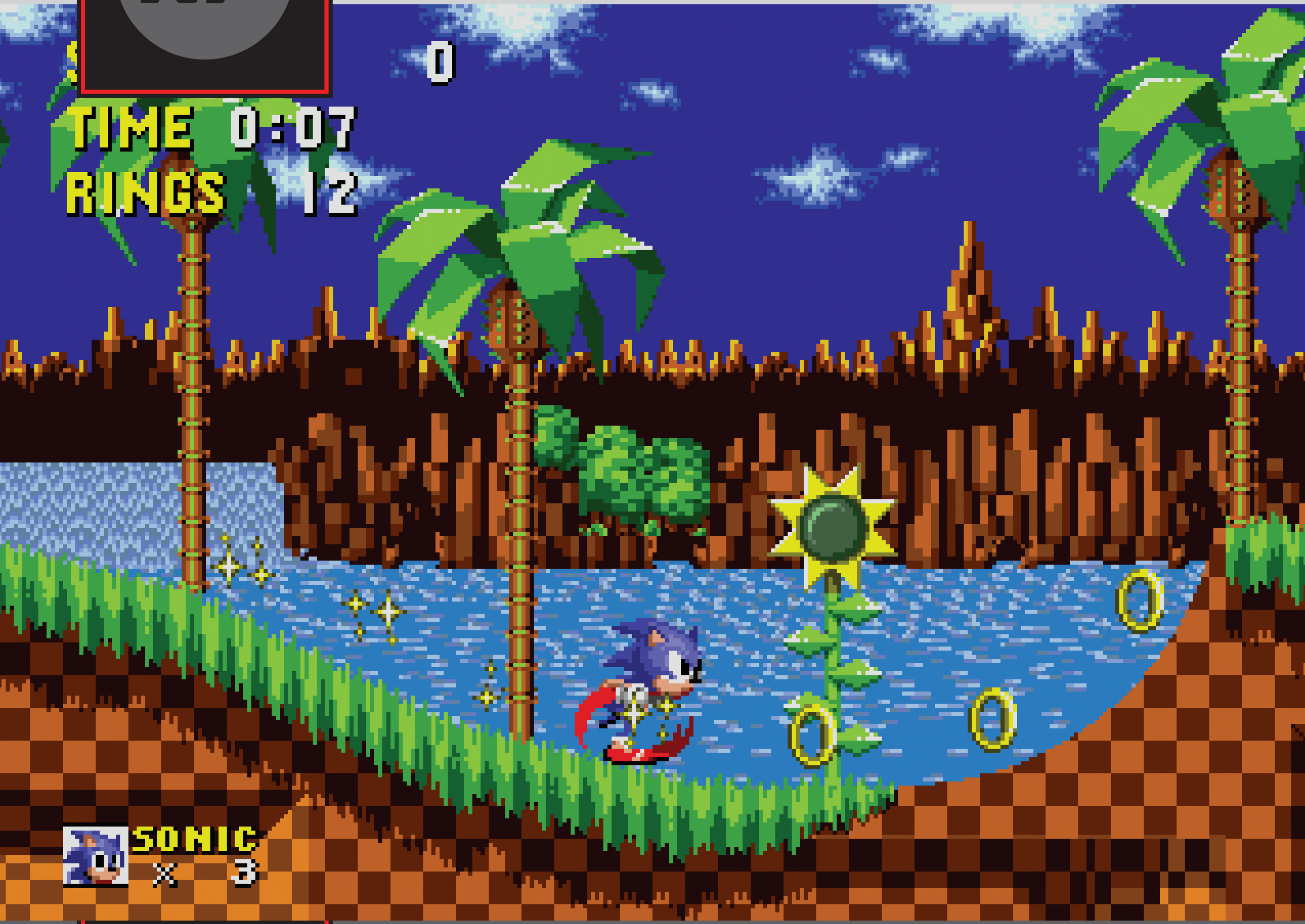
After completing work on Sonic Mania several years ago, developer Christian Whitehead and several of his teammates that brought that game to life founded a new studio together, giving it the name Evening Star. What they've been working on has been a mystery for years, but it's just recently been revealed that they're building a brand-new IP: Penny's Big Breakaway.

Rather than the Sonic Mania 2 that many expected them to make, or the less popular but still plausible theory that they were crafting their own new 2D sidescroller behind closed doors, Penny's Big Breakaway is shockingly a total shift in direction for the team, as it's a 3D platformer that looks like it could have come out of the GameCube age! That part, at least, is still a bit Sega-ish and Sonic-esque — I get some Billy Hatcher vibes here, so I think Christian's inspiration may have shifted from Sega's work in the '90s to the stuff they were putting out in the '00s instead.

The game stars a smiling young circus performer who gets in a *little* over her head. A yo-yo artist by trade, she's called to showcase her skills in front of the Emperor . . . but her performance goes disastrously wrong. The Emperor is embarrassed, he demands that Penny be captured for making him look like a fool and his army of loyal penguin soldiers begins to pursue her to bring her to justice!

Oh, also, her yo-yo is alive. Alive, and insatiably hungry! Penny has to constantly evade capture from the endless chase of the Emperor's birds while also managing Yo-Yo's appetite. Keeping its stomach satisfied is worth the trouble, though, because Yo-Yo is an invaluable assistant — Penny can swing Yo-Yo to attack enemies, use it like a grappling hook, ride on it like a scooter to move along the ground faster than her legs could carry her and much, much more. This yo-yo is truly more than a simple toy!

Evening Star seems to have hit on some energetic ideas in this 3D debut. With how wonderful Sonic Mania was, I'll give Penny a shot for sure, even if it isn't a sidescroller! **— LUCAS**



DASHING THROUGH GREEN HILL ZONE

SONIC THE HEDGEHOG
SEGA GENESIS, 1991

I love Green Hill Zone. I hate Green Hill Zone. I love Green Hill Zone because it's a gaming icon: It's the first level of the first game in the Sonic the Hedgehog series. More people have probably played this level than any other in the series! It's beautiful, well-designed to show off the core mechanics of the game and features a catchy-as-all tune by Masato Nakamura of the band Dreams Come True. In Sonic Adventure 2, it was the ultimate reward: a 3D version of Sonic's original stomping grounds, made available only to those players who collected every emblem in the game. And when it came time to select past levels to celebrate 20 years of the Blue Blur's adventures? There could be no other choice. It practically became synonymous with Sonic. Maybe *too* synonymous, it turns out. It reappeared in Sonic Mania, and again in Sonic Forces, and in Sonic Runners, and Sonic Jump, and Sonic Dash and Speed Battle and LEGO Dimensions and Super Smash Bros. and . . . it's also the characters' "home" in Sonic Prime on Netflix. What was once a nostalgic novelty became rote and repetitive. On the whole, I love Green Hill Zone. But how can we miss it if it won't go away? Thankfully, it looks like Sega's listening and giving it a bit of a break. — **DAVID**

WARP ZONE

What Nintendo Power was writing about way back when.

THE 112TH ISSUE of Nintendo Power from September 1998 was ready to race out of your mailbox and hit you like a Falcon PUNCH to the face, as F-Zero X blazed across the cover. In a dead heat for second place were Cruis'n World, Wipeout 64, EA Sports NASCAR '99, Midway's simply named Blitz (before the NFL license was locked in), Gex 64: Enter the Gecko, Bomberman Hero, Mission: Impossible (which shared a poster with Turok 2: Seeds of Evil), Deadly Arts, WinBack, Knife Edge and The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time. One would be remiss not to note the absence of any Game Boy games in this issue, as the Portable Power platform was approaching its 10th anniversary.

As a fan of toys, one particular page that's long fascinated me, personally, is the ad in this issue for the "Officially Licensed Nintendo Collectibles" from BD&A. This was probably the biggest line of non-game Nintendo products seen since the late '80s. What's more, a closer look shows a version of a Link action figure from Ocarina of Time that went unreleased, different from the one that eventually saw release in stores!

The grand prize winner of this issue's Player's Poll would have a chance to hit the links in Hawaii at the Waialae Country Club, complete with their own personal set of new Taylor Made clubs, and lessons in how to use them from a golf pro! Oh, and a copy of Waialae Country Club: True Golf Classics for the Nintendo 64. You know, if that's your thing. "USA Invaded by Pokéman" (so *that's* where it came from!) headlined Pak Watch, covering the rollout of the famous VW Beetles decorated as Pikachu in Topeka(-chu), Kansas.

Oh, and a Yoshi mask was included, for NP fans to wear in their yearbook photos. (No, seriously.)

Before we move on, it's also worth noting that this issue marked a turning point in the storied history of Nintendo Power. From the beginning, the publication subsisted on its own in-house advertising, but starting here with Bomberman Hero, Knife Edge and NFL Quarterback Club '99, more external advertisements began to make their way into these pages.

NP #113 in October 1998 got straight to the point with a Turok 2 cover, as the eponymous Hunter of Dinosaurs nocked an arrow all up in our grill. Fighting Force, Bomberman Hero (sharing a poster with Fox Sports College Hoops '99), Buck Bumble, Space Station Silicon Valley, Twisted Edge Extreme Snowboarding, EA Sports NASCAR '99 and WCW/nWo Revenge were all ready to rumble, too, brother! Plus, the NP staff pit Madden NFL '99 against NFL QB Club '99 to find out once and for all who the preferred pigskin player is, and an Ocarina of Time feature showed how the game was all about making history . . . literally. And hey, Mulan! For Game Boy!

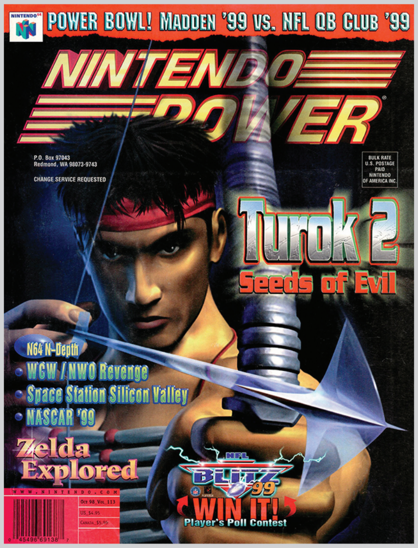
The grand prize winner of this month's Player's Poll Contest would receive a blitz of Blitz – NFL Blitz, that is, as they'd get to take home Midway's arcade coin-op *and* the Nintendo 64 version (which would be easier to take to a friend's house, one would imagine).

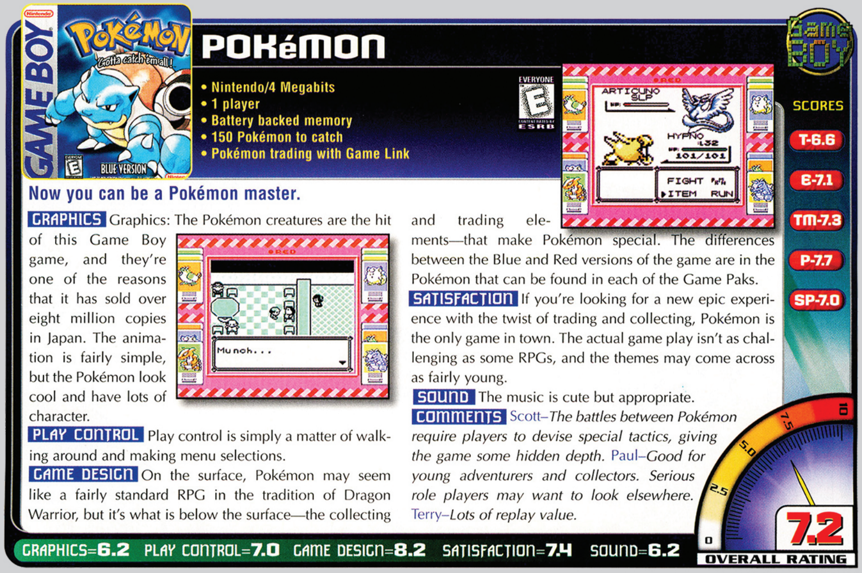
In "Eurogames," Nintendo took a tour of international developers, checking in with Rare, Factor 5, DMA, Infogrames, Interactive Studios, Probe, Psygnosis, Argonaut, Titus and Ubi Soft to see what was cooking at each, and Pak Watch closed us out with the reveal of the upcoming Game Boy Color.

Finally, we don't talk much about the Now Playing reviews here, but we couldn't help ourselves this month. This is the issue in which the original Pokémon was reviewed . . . and amid all the hype, it was given the astonishing score of 7.2! NASCAR '99 rated higher than that! And people say Nintendo Power was biased. **– DAVID**

ISSUE #112: SEPTEMBER 1998

ISSUE #113: OCTOBER 1998





POKéMON

- Nintendo/4 Megabits
- 1 player
- Battery backed memory
- 150 Pokémon to catch
- Pokémon trading with Game Link

Now you can be a Pokémon master.

GRAPHICS Graphics: The Pokémon creatures are the hit of this Game Boy game, and they're one of the reasons that it has sold over eight million copies in Japan. The animation is fairly simple, but the Pokémon look cool and have lots of character.

PLAY CONTROL Play control is simply a matter of walking around and making menu selections.

GAME DESIGN On the surface, Pokémon may seem like a fairly standard RPG in the tradition of Dragon Warrior, but it's what is below the surface—the collecting and trading elements—that make Pokémon special. The differences between the Blue and Red versions of the game are in the Pokémon that can be found in each of the Game Paks.

SATISFACTION If you're looking for a new epic experience with the twist of trading and collecting, Pokémon is the only game in town. The actual game play isn't as challenging as some RPGs, and the themes may come across as fairly young.

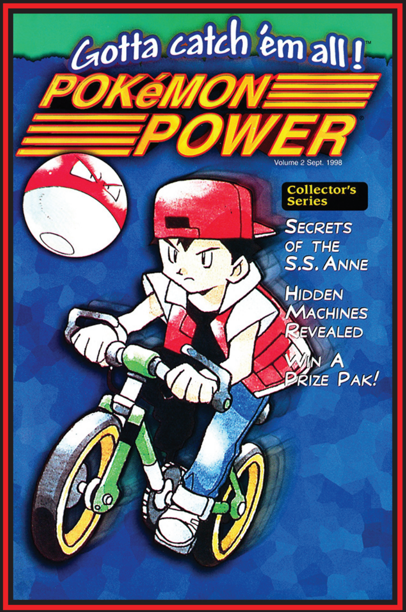
SOUND The music is cute but appropriate.

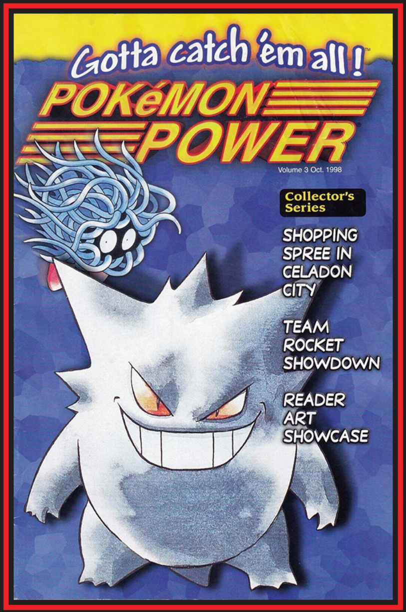
COMMENTS Scott–*The battles between Pokémon require players to devise special tactics, giving the game some hidden depth.* Paul–*Good for young adventurers and collectors. Serious role players may want to look elsewhere.* Terry–*Lots of replay value.*

SCORES: T-6.6 E-7.1 TM-7.3 P-7.7 SP-7.0

GRAPHICS=6.2 PLAY CONTROL=7.0 GAME DESIGN=8.2 SATISFACTION=7.4 SOUND=6.2

7.2 OVERALL RATING





NINTENDO POWER'S LIMITED-TIME SPIN-OFF MAGAZINE

REMEMBERING POKÉMON POWER

BACK IN 1998, Pokémon fever was a sensation that was sweeping the nation . . . *s*, all around the world. It was so huge, in fact, that the pages of Nintendo Power couldn't hope to contain it! In order to deliver all the latest Pokémon news, tips and info Pokéfans demanded on a monthly basis, it was time to Play with Power . . . Pokémon Power!

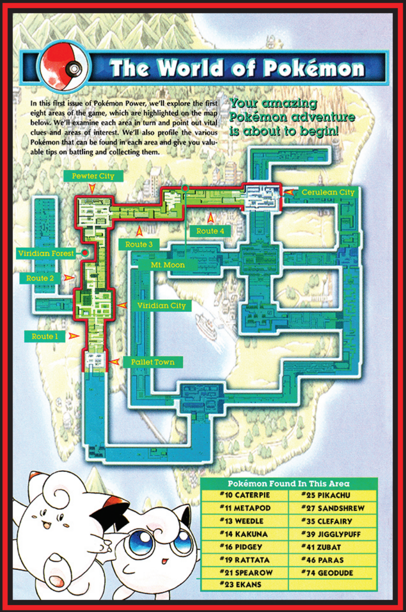
These magazines-within-a-magazine were inserts that were included for six issues, starting with August 1998's NP #111. Naturally, the focus at the time was on the only two games to exist at first: Pokémon Red Version and Pokémon Blue Version. (Wow, only *two* Pokémon games in existence? Can you even imagine such a time?), as well as some of the media and other fun surrounding the property. Here's a bit about each of the first three issues.

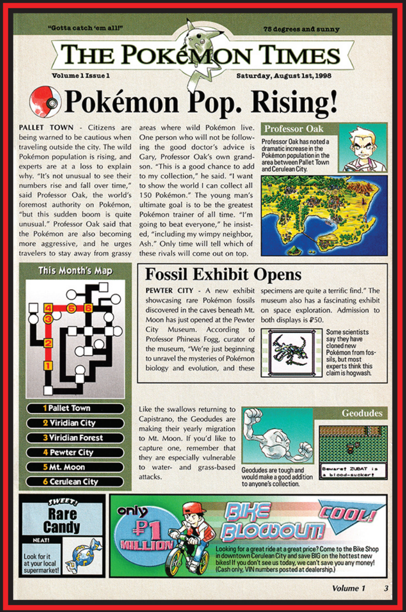
The first issue (helpfully marked as a Collector's Edition) explored the first eight areas of the game, as well as offering tips on which Pokémon are found in those areas, the basics on Pokémon Marts and Pokémon Centers, choosing your first Pokémon, the two versions, and how to best early Gym leaders Misty and Brock. For those who wish they lived a little closer to the world of Pokémon, there was also an in-universe newspaper called "The Pokémon Times."

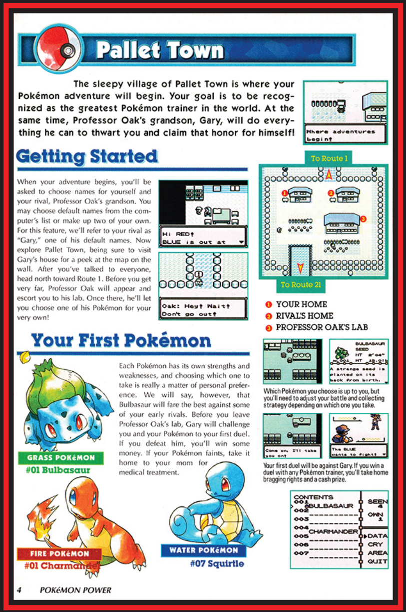
About 11 pages in, things took a turn for the animated — or maybe that should be "anime-ted" — as the anime version of Professor Oak presented us with profiles of the Pokémon Bulbasaur, Weedle and Paras. There was also a bit about evolution, and even some fan art! The next 20 pages were a film comic that adapted the first episode of the anime, "I Choose You, Pikachu," which followed some kid named Ash from Pallet Town. To be honest, he seems like kind of a loser . . . probably won't amount to anything. Not like that other guy, Red! Red is the G.O.A.T.

But I digress. Things wrapped up with a couple of pages of television stations that were carrying the Pokémon show at the time. (Wow, that feels quaint. Is that even a thing anymore?)

The next two issues largely followed suit, covering Route 24 through Route 7, and then Celadon City through Route 12. The game version of Professor Oak spotlighted Bellsprout, Drowzee and Mankey, then Eevee, Fearow and Zubat. "Pokémon Showdown" (featuring the debut of Team Rocket) and "Ash Catches a Pokémon" were featured as film comics. The second issue also had a contest for a Pokémon Prize Pak consisting of the winner's choice of Pokémon version and a Game Link cable, while the third brought news about Viz Media releasing Pokémon manga and the anime on VHS! **— DAVID**







INTERVIEW

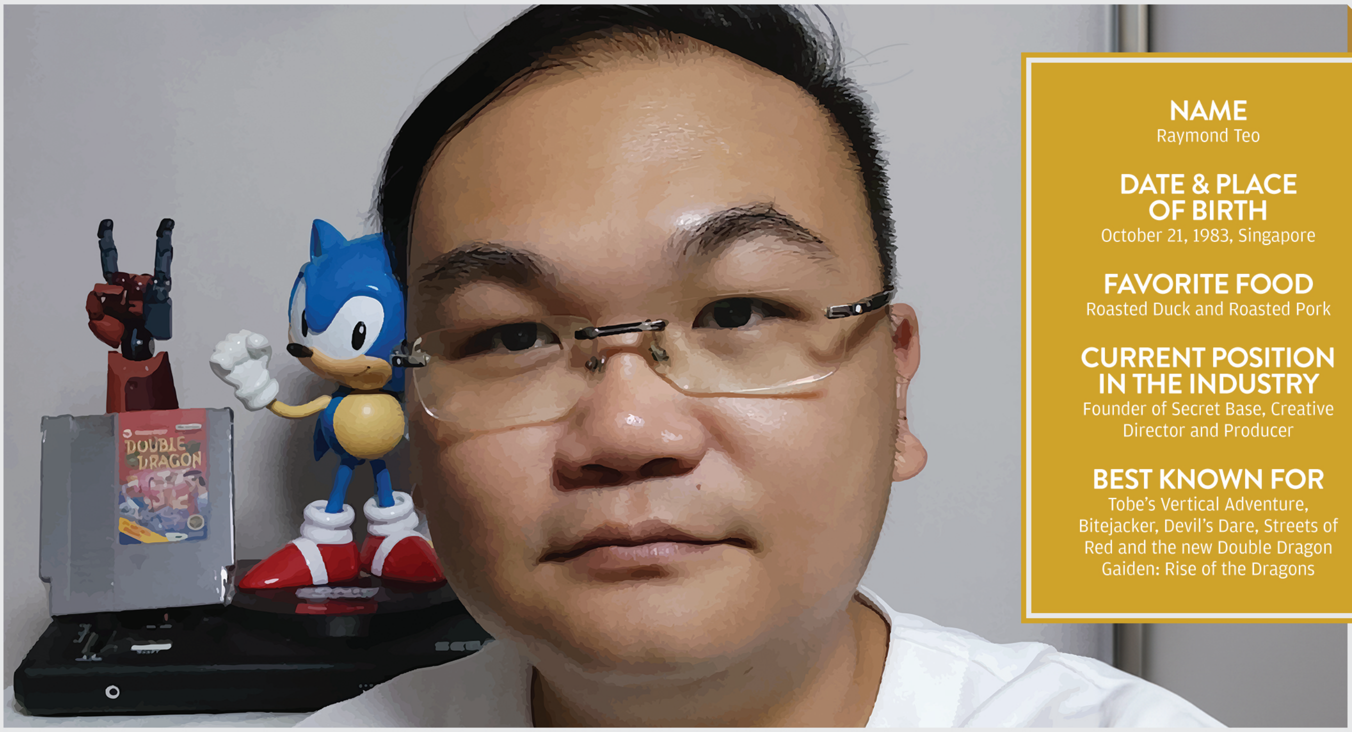
NAME
Koji Ogata

DATE & PLACE OF BIRTH
January 1964, Nagasaki Prefecture

FAVORITE FOOD
Sushi, Ramen, Hamburger

CURRENT POSITION IN THE INDUSTRY
Freelance in a wide range of fields including illustration, animation and character design

BEST KNOWN FOR
Double Dragon, Nekketsu Kouha Kunio-kun (called Renegade outside of Japan), Detective Jinguji Saburo



NAME
Raymond Teo

DATE & PLACE OF BIRTH
October 21, 1983, Singapore

FAVORITE FOOD
Roasted Duck and Roasted Pork

CURRENT POSITION IN THE INDUSTRY
Founder of Secret Base, Creative Director and Producer

BEST KNOWN FOR
Tobe's Vertical Adventure, Bitejacker, Devil's Dare, Streets of Red and the new Double Dragon Gaiden: Rise of the Dragons

KOJI OGATA & RAYMOND TEO

It's a double interview with Double Dragon's originator and its newest creator!

INTERVIEW BY JONATHAN HOLMES

NF: What inspired you to enter this industry?

KOJI OGATA: It was actually pure chance that led me to the game industry.

As a younger man, I moved to Tokyo from Nagasaki looking for a design-related job. I found an ad from Technos Japan saying they were looking for designers, but at the time I didn't know they were a game development company. My fate changed forever because I answered that ad.

RAYMOND TEO: I guess you can say that I kind of started off in 2006, making advertising games using Adobe Flash in a multimedia design company I started with a group of friends. There wasn't much of a game development industry here in Singapore during that time, so although I was very interested, that's as far as I could go with that.

About a year later, the Singapore government started an initiative, giving locals small startup grants to encourage people to try making games. So, I took the leap of faith and left the multimedia design company to give it a shot. That was the start of my journey as an indie game developer.

What other video games, movies and TV shows have most influenced your work on Double Dragon?

OGATA: The basic elements of the beat-'em-ups that Technos Japan would later specialize in were built from an arcade wrestling game called Exciting Hour. *[Ogata's first game at Technos Japan, renamed Mat Mania in the West.]* The game had a big impact on both the arcade gaming scene as a whole, and on Technos in particular.

The character designs for Double Dragon were heavily influenced by the movies Mad Max and The Warriors. The vest and pants worn by the lead character of Renegade *[the localized version of the first Kunio-kun/River City game]*, came directly from The Warriors. Then Double Dragon was born from Kunio-kun's success. And both Billy and Jimmy ended up wearing similar vests as the character from Renegade. It's all connected.

TEO: With Gaiden, I was mostly influenced by the mainline Double Dragon series, from the arcade and NES. However, I also looked into all the other mediums that the series has been taken to, like the Saturday morning cartoon, the movie, its spin-off fighting game and so on. We also looked at some of the media that Ogata-san just mentioned that inspired the original team in the first place, like The Warriors, Bruce Lee movies, Fist of the North Star and things like that.

In short, a bit of everything, as the goal with Gaiden wasn't to make an improved version of one specific Double Dragon from the past, but to instead make a new interpretation of the franchise. It was best to research and internalize everything.

Double Dragon is based in the world of Kunio-kun/River City, but it has a decidedly more Western feel to it. Did you consciously try to make your work on Double Dragon appealing to both Eastern and Western audiences?

OGATA: It all started with Yoshihasa Kishimoto, the creator of Kunio-kun/River City, who was in charge of planning the original Double Dragon. He came up with the initial world, settings and character concepts. We all believed that Kunio-kun's style of action would appeal to people outside of Japan, but were aware that it was tied to unique Japanese sensibilities.

With Double Dragon, the global audience was always in mind. Everything about it – from the name of the game itself, to the names of its lead characters and onwards – was a direct tribute to Bruce Lee, but put in a post-apocalyptic setting.

Specifically, many of the names of enemies in Double Dragon are taken directly from the movie Enter the Dragon. Abobo's name came from O'Hara, one of the huge, overpowering fighters from that movie. Roper and Williams, two iconic thugs you fight throughout the game, are named after Roper and Williams from the same movie, but their visual designs were based more on characters from Mad Max. It was all a big brawl of different influences mixing it up right from the start.

TEO: Like Ogata-san said, the theme and lore behind the original Double Dragon already did most of the heavy lifting in giving it broad appeal. The game's emphasis on kung fu, with inspiration from Bruce Lee, has long been popular with the Eastern audience. On top of that, we have the post-nuclear war, gang-driven, '80s NYC settings, inspired by movies like Mad Max and The Warriors, which I imagine appeal to the West. Quite honestly, when you blend two such contrasting themes, it is already attractive to both sides by itself. My job with Gaiden has been to carry the torch and make sure I present it right and present it well.

How did you incorporate the idea of the ill-fated live-action film version of Double Dragon into your work? Also, do you have a dream creative team (including living and deceased actors) for a new film based on the series?

OGATA: When I first heard about the movie, I didn't think of it as something completely separate from the games. It was different, but there was no reason to not try to use those ideas to make a good game, especially seeing as so many ideas for the Double Dragon games came from movies. A little later, I was part of the team that made the Double Dragon fighting game for Neo Geo that used some of those movie characters in a game for the first time. It was a fun project to work on.

As for what actors I'd cast in a new Double Dragon movie, well, film casting is difficult. I can't think of much. Honestly, you may not want to see Double Dragon again in live action! *(laughs)*

TEO: I suppose Double Dragon is not the best video game movie, but I can totally see how the director was trying to go for a "The Warriors for kids" vibe. So, story and storytelling aside, I did like their idea for black rain (the toxic pollution that had become a part of regular life in the future), the unique gangs of New York and the mystical power from ancient China. In fact, I have taken inspiration from the movie for Gaiden and wanted to do more with it.

As for actors I might cast, I haven't given much thought to it, but I can share that when designing the characters for Gaiden, I had to come up with multiple image references for each character. I used a lot of pictures, and some of them were of celebrities. If I recall correctly, I used David Bowie for Billy Lee, both Jackson Wang and Donnie Yen for Jimmy Lee, and Jennie Kim from the musical group Blackpink for Marian. They don't necessarily look like what I imagine those characters would be in real life, but I was still influenced by some of their specific features, and the aura they have.

NINTENDO FANS ARE MOST FAMILIAR WITH THE NES VERSION OF DOUBLE DRAGON FROM 1988, BUT THE SERIES ORIGINATED IN ARCADES ONE YEAR EARLIER. LUCKILY, BOTH VERSIONS ARE AVAILABLE ON SWITCH, LETTING YOU EXPERIENCE SOME OF KOJI OGATA'S EARLIEST WORK!

What do you think makes the Double Dragon series so enduring and influential in the industry?

OGATA: The beat-'em-up genre was perfect for the American market. Double Dragon led that, and swept up arcades with its unprecedented action gameplay. It also hit at the perfect time to try to translate that kind of arcade action to home consoles like the NES, which were finally powerful enough to at least come close to the same visual power of coin-op machines. This helped get our works into homes, and to a wider range of age groups. Using the classic hero archetypes from popular movies did even more to make our games resonate with huge audiences.

TEO: The original Double Dragon had a huge impact for all action games that came after it, establishing the basic structure and template for everyone else. After Double Dragon, developers would say things like "I want to make a game that's Double Dragon with magic in an ancient setting" to pitch their games, and everyone knew what they meant. Because the game itself is so iconic, it serves as the base template.

As for what made it enduring, I believe at some point, it's not just the game, but the memories we've had with the people we've played the games with way back when. I think Double Dragon being a two-player game, with a simple premise to save someone important, allowed lots of brothers or fathers and sons to bond together over it. I've certainly heard many people telling me that "This is me and my Dad's game" or "me and my brother's game," and "I'm going to play this new one with my son" or "with my daughter."

Did you have to cut any characters, or visual designs, from your work on Double Dragon? Are there any lost heroes or villains out there?

OGATA: There are almost no characters or visual traits that we had to cut in those days, in part because of how we made games back then.

In the early days at Technos Japan, most characters were first drawn up as pixels. In most cases, these pixel designs that were created and refined in our software were the same ones that you saw in the games that were released to the public. The production art that was created to help promote the game, like the posters and the box art, was drawn and painted afterward. That was our opportunity to add details that couldn't fit in the pixels.

TEO: Actually, with Gaiden we created lots of characters and moves throughout development that simply did not make it into the game. It wasn't much of a problem for us because the strategy was to create more, then test them, and only keep the best ones.

That said, there were some ideas for characters that would have worked great, but didn't make it to the final game since we already had too many characters. But after the game launches, perhaps we can look into bringing more characters into the game in the form of DLC.

I also wanted to have a lot more gangs with even more fleshed-out and dynamic interactions. As it turns out, four gangs were as much as our relatively small team could handle, so maybe we will leave that material for the sequel.

Double Dragon has been in all sorts of media, and has been reinvented in games over and over by a huge, diverse list of studios. The one thing it's never been is a big, open-world 3D title. Why do you think that is, and if you were working on a Double Dragon game in that style, what are some of the things you'd want to do with it?

OGATA: Personally, I think the 3D open-world genre is perfect for the battle style of Double Dragon, and Technos Japan-style action games in general. Scoping out a large, detailed world, and offering near-infinite ways to play, are exactly what we were going for with Double Dragon. The original Kunio-kun (Renegade) was about fighting in a closed space, and Double Dragon worked to evolve that experience into a system where you traveled to a variety of places, fighting as you go, using all sorts of things you find on your path as weapons. Current 2D beat-'em-ups have stayed pretty close to those core concepts.

But what if we could make a 3D beat-'em-up in the Technos Japan style that evolved the combat system, allowing for 1-against-10 battles with the player surrounded by attackers on all sides, with all sorts of weapons and irregular attacks that make specific use of the 3D terrain? It's exciting to envision.

TEO: Rockstar actually made an open-world game based on The Warriors in 2005. I've watched tons of videos about it, but I've never actually played it. Some of its ideas were amazing, and I can imagine them working really well with Double Dragon.

Another game that comes to mind is Sleeping Dogs, which I also categorized as an open-world beat-'em-up. But both of these games seemed to be more open-world than beat-'em-up, and I would much prefer one that's a beat-'em-up first, and open-world second. A semi-open-world with its own twist, something like Dead Rising, might be more interesting.

Billy and Jimmy have maintained their signature looks in every game, TV show, comic and movie they've appeared in, with Billy in blue and Jimmy in red. But Marian is constantly changing her style. In one game, she's a party girl getting ready for a night on the town, and in the next, she's an Egyptian goddess of death, or a cop, or a brainwashed boss at the end of a level. Why do you think Marian changes so much from game to game, and what's your favorite version of the character?

OGATA: The main reason is that Marian did not have an official character design in our "Double Dragon Character Bible." The arcade version, NES version and SNES versions all had different planners, and as a result, various Marians were born. Every type of Marian is unique, and I think people like that.

TEO: That's interesting. The franchise was known to have been handled by multiple different studios, so I had imagined that there probably wasn't a standardized character guideline beyond a simple description for the artist to work with.

It also makes sense that with Billy and Jimmy being the main characters, most of the time you wouldn't want to change them too drastically. But Marian is probably the next in line in terms of recognizability, so it's cool that every dev team could put her into their games and try to give her a different spin.

The theme of this magazine issue is sidescrolling rivalries. So, who do you side with in the old Mario vs. Sonic rivalry? And who do you think would win in a 2 vs. 2 battle with Billy and Jimmy on one side, and Sonic and Mario on the other?

ON THE OPPOSITE END OF THE DOUBLE DRAGON SERIES TIMELINE, YOU CAN ALSO EXPERIENCE THE NEWEST ADVENTURE OF THE LEE BROTHERS (AND 11 OTHER PLAYABLE FIGHTERS) IN DOUBLE DRAGON GAIDEN: RISE OF THE DRAGONS, NOW ALSO AVAILABLE ON SWITCH!

OGATA: If I had to choose between Mario and Sonic, it would be Mario. Unfortunately, even though I've played Sonic games for a long time, I've never enjoyed them as much as Mario.

But if Billy and Jimmy were to fight the two of them, I'd say that Billy and Jimmy would definitely win. Mario and Sonic are great, but Billy and Jimmy are martial artists and live for battle. *(laughs)*

TEO: Fighting capability aside, I think the Lee brothers being actual siblings would help them work together as a team better than Mario and Sonic would, who themselves were at war for the longest time!

But what I really want to see is having the Lee brothers in Smash Bros. to find out! Or we could also have Mario and Sonic in Double Dragon Gaiden and find out that way. That would make my day. *(laughs)*

Do you have any advice for young, aspiring game developers who want to one day make their own beat-'em-up game?

OGATA: I've worked on many games in many different genres, from major manufacturers to smaller software houses, so there is a lot I could say. But the most important lesson is to always remember your creativity and your ambition. Keep creating and keep trying to achieve new goals.

Also, you have to value communication. Always look around you and find people to partner with whose skills and experiences you can learn from.

TEO: Try to play small games and learn to deconstruct them. And by "small" I don't just mean games that aren't on a AAA scale like Hades or Hollow Knight. Those games are huge in my book. I'm talking about something at least as simple as Snake, Tetris or Canabalt, because they are more manageable.

If you've only played AAA open-world games, with hundreds of hours gameplay, cinematic visuals and storytelling, you might find that you don't even know which of the many things that went into those games made you like them the most. And if you don't know that, then how would you know what you want to make yourself, and where to start?

Learn to do high-resolution thinking – to really sit down and analyze something, what you've experienced from playing it, what you enjoyed about it, how you can recreate that experience, what you could do with it in your own style and so on.

On top of that, game development is often a group effort, so learn to articulate your thoughts using simple words. Break them down to points and actionable steps. Don't be vague. Be precise and leave as little to interpretation as you can.

If you had an unlimited budget to make a game with any Nintendo franchise, what would you choose and what would you do with it?

OGATA: I'd love to make a 3D beat-'em-up like the one I talked about earlier in the interview, but with all Nintendo characters. Of course, Kunio, Billy, Jimmy and Abobo would also show up to lend a hand.

TEO: Yeah, something like Super Smash Bros, but in the form of a beat-'em-up, would be fun! I enjoyed Brawl's Subspace Emissary and was disappointed it didn't make a return.

But if I have to pick something that's not a beat-'em-up, I'd love to give Ice Climber or Kid Icarus a shot, as one of my earliest games was Tobe's Vertical Adventure and there's so much you can do with the verticality in a game. Just thinking about it makes me excited! *(laughs)*

Finally, if you could have any superpower, what would it be and why?

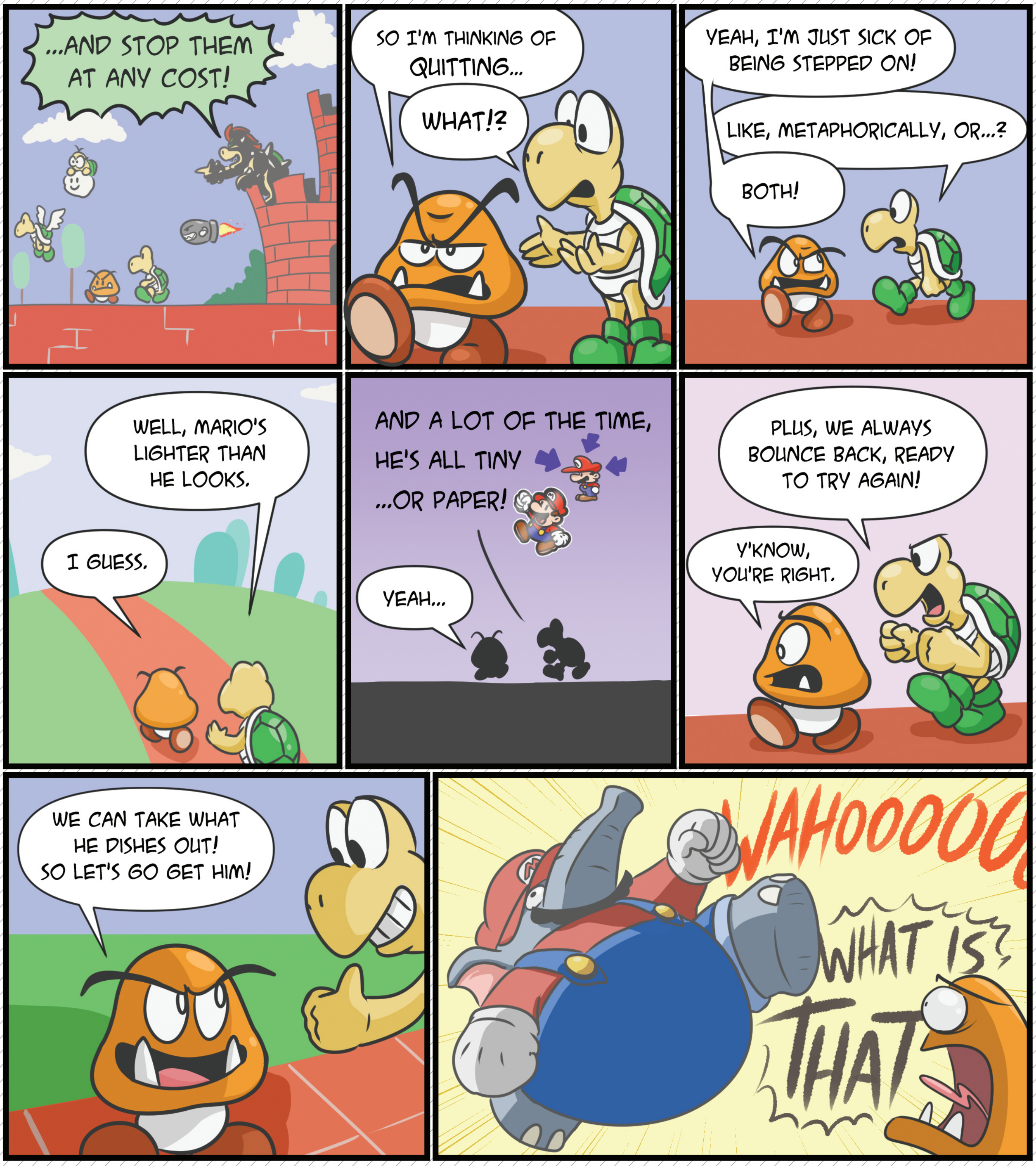
OGATA: If I had the ability to move through time and space like Hiro from the TV show Heroes, my life might have been . . . more enjoyable. *(laughs)*

TEO: And for me, to make it fun, I'd say mind control. That way, I'd get to work on any franchise I want! *(laughs)* But in truth, superpowers in real life are like a cheat codes in games: They give you a few good chuckles for the first 30 minutes, but usually end up ruining the fun in the long run.

KOJI OGATA'S MODERN MARIANS!

Just as every generation has a new James Bond, and every iteration of the Ninja Turtles has its own April O'Neil, every studio that's made a Double Dragon has its own Marian. And now, for the very first time, Nintendo Force is proud to host Koji Ogata's take on two of the most popular Marian variants! In 2017's Double Dragon IV, Ogata-san came back to the franchise and Marian with a slightly updated take on her 8-bit look. But since then, a couple of alternate universe versions of the character have gained followings of their own: the gun-toting heroine from Double Dragon Gaiden, and the platinum-haired pro wrester from River City Girls 2. Ogata-san drew these modern Marians just for this interview, and the results are nothing short of historic! He'll also be contributing all-new "River City Girls 2 vs. Renegade" artwork to a future issue of Lock-On magazine, while he continues to update his official website, **konart19.booth.pm**, with new works for purchase (and yes, he ships internationally). Let's hope he takes on live-action Alyssa Milano Marian next!

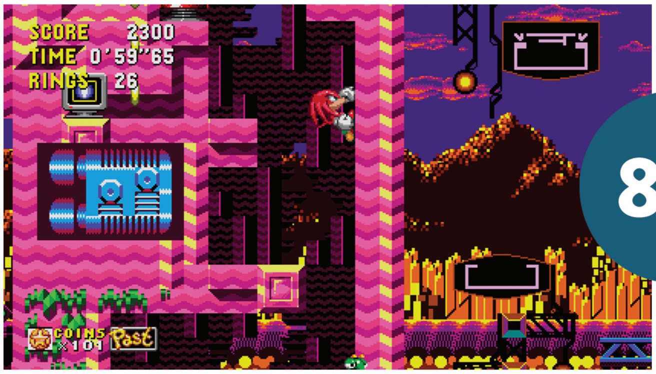
Goomba in Retireminion



BY MATTHEW TARANTO

REVIEWS

Blasting back to the past for one more dose of blast processing, it's **Sonic Origins Plus**! Does this revamped collection of sidescrollers warrant a second look (especially since it's now available on a physical Switch cartridge)? Or are its additions, revisions and fresh selection of Game Gear hits not enough to prompt a purchase? Read our full review to find out!



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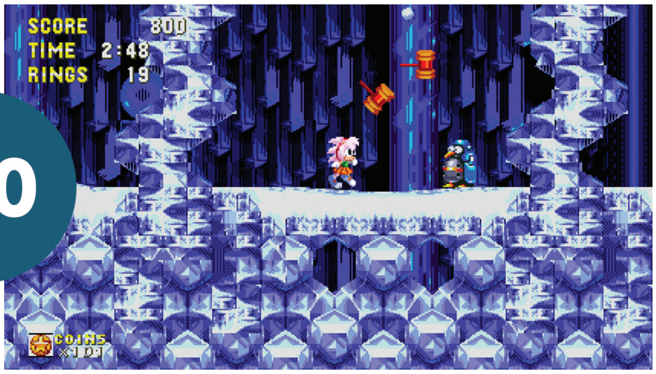


Sonic's Earliest Era + Extras

SONIC ORIGINS PLUS

PLEASE EXCUSE OUR lack of a Sonic Origins review last year. The backlash to the compilation's shoddy technical state at launch was so bitter, we figured we ought to wait until the inevitable Version 2.0 before sharing our proper impressions.

One revolution around the sun later, Sonic Origins Plus is offering a mea culpa in the form of playable Amy Rose, the complete Sonic Game Gear catalog and an entire colony's worth of bugs squashed dead. Since Sega is hoping we can all move past those fussy growing pains, let's humor them by just pretending the base package never existed in the first place. Cool? Cool.

Everyone's familiar with Mr. Needlemouse's 16-bit legacy. Sonic 1 was a rough yet alluring experiment in momentum-based platforming. Sonic 2 featured tighter pacing and more consistent difficulty, both of which unraveled toward the end. Sonic 3 & Knuckles trumped its predecessors in content, variety and replay value. And Sonic CD was . . . weird. All classics. All innovative. And all rereleased like a hundred times over the last three decades.

To spice up this latest release, Sega streamlined Christian Whitehead's mobile remasters of 1, 2 and CD for home consoles, then enlisted the full Sonic Mania crew to rebuild 3&K in the Retro Engine. These aren't your typical emulated ROMs, as they sport a medley of upgrades like animated cutscenes that bookend each adventure, improved framerates in Special Stages and an NES Remix-flavored Mission Mode that's more addictive than it has any right to be.

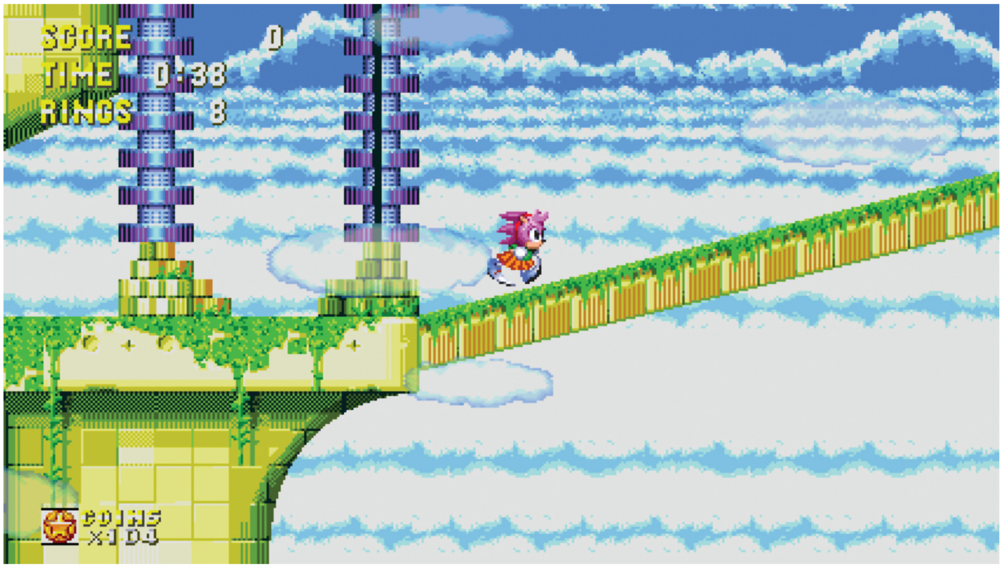
Oh, and Sonic can perform Mania's Drop Dash now, because why not?

The main event is Anniversary Mode, in the which the four campaigns are presented in widescreen and ditch lives in favor of collectable Coins that can be used to replay Special Stages immediately or purchase Museum content like cutscene animatics or rare artwork. They also offer the choice of playing as Sonic, Tails, Knuckles or Amy, even if they never appeared in that particular game back in the '90s, opening up wild new traversal options that Sonic Team could've never anticipated – gliding around as Knuckles in Sonic CD's labyrinthine Zones in search of Robot Transporters must be what a sidescrolling version of Sonic Adventure's treasure hunts would feel like!

Of course, you're probably most curious about Amy's playstyle. She's essentially a Sonic clone, incorporating her trusty Piko Piko Hammer into her repertoire for that extra sizzle. Remember Sonic's Insta-Shield in 3&K? She can do the same but with a much longer range, allowing her to inflict pain on bots that would be completely out of reach for the boys. It's hilarious how many boss battles she breaks thanks to her Hammer's expansive area of potential impact!

Then there's Classic Mode, which is supposed to provide an old-school Genesis experience. Instead, these are merely the Anniversary editions with certain parameters switched off. It seems disingenuous to call these "Classic" and not commit to authenticity – for starters, Sonic shouldn't be able to use the Spin Dash in 1, nor should Tails fly in 2! Instead of a dedicated mode, why not just allow players to toggle settings like the lives counter and aspect ratio in the main menu?

But barring that half-baked mode, I'm pleased with Sonic Origins Plus. If there are still any lingering technical hiccups from the initial release, I certainly didn't notice them. All I noticed were childhood classics made palatable again after years of being served reheated leftovers! **– TONY**



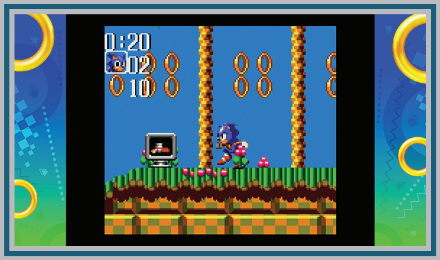
SWITCH PUBLISHER: SEGA DEVELOPERS: SONIC TEAM & HEADCANNON RATING: E

SONIC THE HEDGEHOG

Sonic the Hedgehog on Game Gear repurposes some of its Genesis counterpart's Zones like Green Hill and Labyrinth, while also introducing new ones like Bridge and Jungle. Overall, it's a decent handheld debut that adequately adapts the series' speed to 8-bit specs.

SONIC THE HEDGEHOG 2

Most of Sonic's Game Gear platformers also had Master System versions. The unfairly difficult Sonic 2 must've been developed with the latter's resolution in mind, because its blind jumps and off-screen obstacles clearly never took the smaller screen size into consideration.



SONIC CHAOS

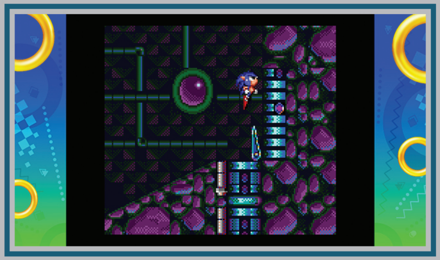
Flight-enabling Rocket Shoes! Sonic CD's Super Peel Out! Playable Tails! These additions and more make Chaos much improved over 2, even if it swings the difficulty pendulum too far in the opposite direction with criminally short Zones and extremely dumb bosses.

DR. ROBOTNIK'S MEAN BEAN MACHINE

It's Puyo Puyo! Tetris remains my preferred falling block puzzler, but matching colored blobs still has its charms, especially when dressed in an Adventures of Sonic skin.

SONIC DRIFT

Sonic Drift is for racing game fans who sometimes wish Super Mario Kart had half the roster and just six tracks that repeat with only minimal layout changes across each of the cups. Once you get a handle on drifting, you're basically guaranteed to win every race.



SONIC SPINBALL

At least the other portable entries *try* to be fresh takes on the home console experience. Meanwhile, Sonic Spinball is just an underbaked port with a smattering of paltry alterations – and it's not like the original Genesis version was all that great to begin with!

SONIC TRIPLE TROUBLE

All of the previous Game Gear platformers walked so that Triple Trouble could run! If you only play one game in this catalog, make it this one – especially if you're curious about how Sonic Superstars baddie Fang the Hunter (a.k.a. Nack the Weasel) first entered the scene.

SONIC DRIFT 2

A decent number of drivers, improved course variety and actual challenge make Sonic Drift 2 the racer that the first should've been. You might even be entertained for 15 minutes as opposed to the original's 10 before realizing your time is better spent elsewhere!

TAILS' SKYPATROL

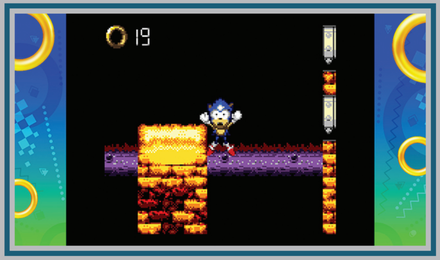
Tails' Skypatrol is the first of two unique titles starring Sonic's precocious pal that stray from the typical momentum-based action the series is known for. This one is a shmup-lite that swaps out laser blasters for a Ring boomerang. Is it any good? Nah.

TAILS ADVENTURE

Tails Adventure, on the other hand, is a Monster World-esque adventure that exploits ol' Miles Prower's talents as a grease monkey, from operating a remote-controlled drone to piloting his Sea Fox submarine. Many players despise this game for its slow pace and backtracking, but I honestly dig it!

SONIC LABYRINTH

What if Sonic – *gasp!* – couldn't go fast? That's the premise behind this isometric puzzler in which the Blue Blur must collect keys to unlock each level's goal. The novelty wears out immediately, though I can sorta see this format working if revisited for some of the Special Stages in a proper Sonic platformer.



SONIC BLAST

I retroactively hate pre-rendered graphics now. Look at this disgusting mess! Worse still, the large sprites make the sparse screen real estate even more cramped! Thank heaven that Sonic Blast arrived at the end of Game Gear's life, sparing at least some of the '90s Sega kids from the knowledge of its existence.

Personal Trainer: Efficiency

PIKMIN 4

DO YOU DANDORI?

The Pikmin series has always been about efficiency. In Pikmin 1, you only had 30 days to recover Captain Olimar's 30 missing ship parts, which demanded a completion rate of at least one part per day in order to succeed – you needed to be efficient with your time. In Pikmin 2, that time limit was removed – but the introduction of a second playable character, Louie, made skillful division of labor that game's efficiency challenge. And Pikmin 3 ramped things up even further in that direction, with its three playable heroes making simultaneous multitasking between a trio into its central focus. Three different approaches to directing players toward the same end goal: Playing with purpose, and a plan. Not wasting time or resources.

And now Pikmin 4 has brought us Dandori.

"Dandori" is a real Japanese word, and the game explains its meaning as "the art of organizing your tasks strategically and working with maximum efficiency to execute your plans quickly." It's a practice not to be taken lightly – Pikmin 4's characters embrace Dandori almost as devoutly as a religion. The heroic Rescue Corps, your allies in the adventure, constantly sing the praises of process efficiency. The villain you encounter agrees wholeheartedly, threatening that "Those who do not embrace Dandori cannot survive this planet." Even the little tips you read on loading screens recommend that you welcome the practice of Dandori and try to make it a part of your everyday life!

Aside from obviously intended self-improvement experiences like Brain Age, it's rare to see a Nintendo game be quite this on the nose about trying to affect change in its players – but Pikmin 4 earnestly wants you to become a better person for having played it.

AN UNEXPECTED REBOOT

Pikmin 4 begins with a flat rejection of the continuity established in previous Pikmins. Like the Legend of Zelda and Star Fox franchises before it, this brand has now decided not to care about what came before, and instead retell its story from the start: So Captain Olimar has once again crash-landed on the mysterious Planet PNF-404, and is once again searching for parts gone missing from his splintered spaceship. But Pikmin 4 acts like this is the first time that's ever happened! And this time around, players don't take command of the Captain to help him make his way home (not at first, at least) – instead the tale is twisted, making it so he fails in his attempt at self-rescue. He only manages to send out an S.O.S. to ask for help, which succeeds in summoning the new heroes stepping into the spotlight: the Rescue Corps.

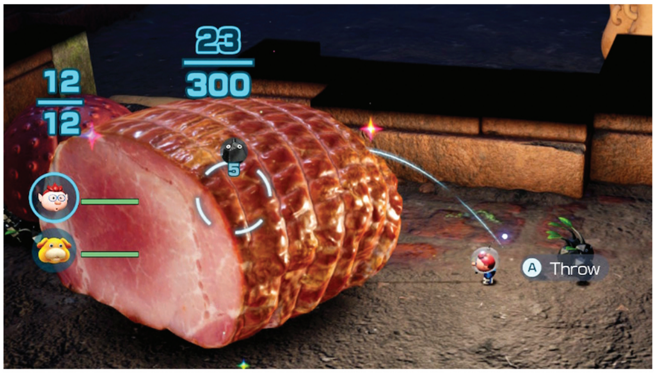
Also, in this version of the story, Olimar befriends a dog. That never happened in Pikmin 1!

While I was initially a bit upset at Nintendo's decision to rewrite history in a series that didn't really need such treatment (the same game scenario could have been set up by making it be just another of Olimar's trips to the planet sometime after the events of Pikmin 3), I'm not losing sleep over it now. After all, every Pikmin installment has kicked things off by slapping the preceding one's story in the face!

You spend all of Pikmin 1 working diligently to restore the S.S. Dolphin to perfect condition . . . and then the opening cutscene of Pikmin 2 has a crane grab it and haul it off to be scrapped for cash the instant Olimar touches back down on his home planet.

Then Pikmin 2 lets us get to know, play as and ultimately even rescue the new hero character, Louie . . . and Pikmin 3 changes him into a raving, juice-stealing madman of a villain who's totally crazed about food.

So Pikmin 3 giving us three great new heroes with Alph, Brittany and Charlie, and Pikmin 4 just instantly retconning them out of existence? Not even giving them a brief cameo? It tracks. (Alph even made it into the Smash cast! Maybe he'll be Thanos-snapped out of its next sequel now?)



CREATION FRUSTRATION

There's no need to worry about Pikmin 4's main character getting scrubbed from the history books at some point in the future, though – because Pikmin 4 has no main character! Instead, for the first time in this series' history, you play as your own custom-made Rescue Corps character.

I don't care for character creators. Not in single-player games like this, at least – I understand their appeal and their need in games like MMORPGs, where tons of different players are all interacting with one another, and having unique names and visual identities is key. But in Pikmin? I'm just playing by myself. Why do I need to make and name my own character if I'm the only one who's going to see it?

I just get paralyzed with anxiety when presented with unnecessary character-making screens. I felt the same way with Xenoblade Chronicles X, and even with Persona 5, where the only customizable aspect of the main character, Joker, was his "real name." I just want the canon name! The canon appearance. Give me the basic, the normal, the vanilla, the boring. I feel like playing as anything other than the default option is somehow wrong.

I do have to give Pikmin 4 praise in this area, though. Custom characters may not be my personal preference, but I can recognize that the dev team did a good job in this case. Dialogue scenes are all written with inclusive they/them pronouns, and once you rescue a character named Puddle fairly early on in the main campaign, you get the option to fully remake yourself as many times as you like. You could do an edit as simple as a hairstyle change all the way up to as complex as totally altering your body shape and even your name. And all the NPCs instantly respect and recognize your new identity, using your new name to refer to you – I feel like that's a thoughtful and important feature here in 2023, and I do want to give Nintendo their flowers for that.

And a bit of a spoiler here, but the coolest character maker feature is when you unlock the option to make your character look like a "Leafling." I got so thrilled for Arlo – one of our former team members and one of the world's biggest Pikmin fans, and also a shaggy blue puppet – because there's a way to make a character that looks just like him. That's incredible.

For anyone who, like me, still would prefer the vanilla option, the default closest-to-canon character choice in Pikmin 4 is picking the first option on each of the creator menu tabs and then choosing "Lisa" as the name of the resulting hero. That will give you a character who matches the various pieces of promo art for the game, as well as the in-game tutorial videos that play from time to time. (And the "Lisa" name was shown briefly in the Nintendo Direct that introduced Dandori Battles.)

BATTLES AND CHALLENGES

. . . Which brings us back to Dandori.

Past Pikmin games have had things like Bingo Battles as set-apart multiplayer modes similar to this, in that you're taken to a relatively small arena and given a few minutes to work as quickly as you can, gathering items or fighting enemies. You may have ignored them then, but here they can't be skipped – both Dandori Battles and Challenges are integrated straight into the main campaign.

Challenges are single-participant affairs – your only opponent is the countdown clock, as you do your best to beat every foe and pick up every treasure before the timer hits zero. It's exhilirating, as I loved pausing right when each new Challenge began to look over the map and make a plan for how to best accomplish every goal. Pretty sure that's exactly the behavior Nintendo was hoping to encourage! And it feels fulfilling to quickly pull together a good-sized squad of Pikmin and expertly assign them to different tasks, taking advantage of every passing second. I'd send some Pikmin to pick up a treasure. Others to mine a gold deposit. Still more would come along with me to be controlled directly as I fought with whatever foes were nearby, and simultaneously my loyal space dog Oatchi would be deployed to the far side of the map to face off against other enemies alone. (He can do it; he's tough.) Executing on a plan and seeing it all come together is great! I enjoyed the Challenges.

The Battles were a little less fun to me. In them, a rival character and a rival dog command a rival team of their own Pikmin and try to outscore you in the same arena – often going after your guys or stealing treasures out from under you. It's more PVP than PVE, even if the opponent is still computer-controlled in the campaign. It's still fun and I still found success in each Dandori Battle, but I didn't like how it only gives you half a screen to work with. I understand splitting the screen for local two-player matches, but why is it still split when I'm just playing the single-player story? Weird.

SWITCH PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER: NINTENDO RATING: E10+

LITTLE GUYS IN A BIG WORLD

If going up against an opponent or even just the clock in the Dandori scenes seems stressful, be advised that the main settings of the game are more easy-going. You can explore the expansive outer areas at your own pace, as there's no time limit on the number of days you can spend there. These gorgeous spaces are a joy to just walk through, and they're filled with treasures to collect, bridges to build and enemies to battle – but even the enemies mostly keep to themselves, so you don't have to take them on until you want to.

Pikmin 4 has six main areas, which is on par with past games, but the new low-to-the-ground camera angle and incredible degree of graphical detail make these places far and away the best the series has ever seen. There only ended up being one "inside the house" area, with the other five all outside, so that's a bit disappointing. But the reality of you and your Pikmin pals being truly tiny is still conveyed well through every environment, from running around a garden and seeing pots and shovels towering over you to visiting a beach and getting to explore a sandcastle that's the size a normal castle would be for a normal-sized human! I loved every minute.

CAVING TO THE PRESSURE

Also scattered around each of the core game areas are a bunch of entrances to caves. These multi-tiered subterranean challenge areas have returned after debuting in Pikmin 2, and they're better than before – every sub-level is its own challenge, as you must safely navigate puzzling platforms, shifting walkways and cramped corridors while fighting off foes. Sometimes truly mad foes who directly pursue you and your squad!

Yes, the tension ramps up again in the caves, and even if some of the first sub-levels are more relaxed, each one almost always end with a big boss battle. These can be truly challenging!

Or not, depending on how you pick to approach them. Pikmin 4 is packed with all kinds of accommodations for new players, like tons of items you can carry along and use at any time. If you were to fight these bosses straight-up, many of them would be hard to handle – but since you can zap them with a paralyzing Lightning Shock, bash into them with Oatchi and pop an Ultra-Spicy Spray to instantly cast Haste on your full crew of Pikmin, many of them end up being total pushovers. That's led some people to complain that this game is too easy. They're longing for the mercilessness of the old games!

But I like it this way. Pikmin 4 has been designed with new players in mind, and veterans will breeze past most of its "toughest" points. But veterans can also easily choose to set their own challenges and restrictions! Did you blitz through the game using all of the available items? Of course you did! Now try playing it again, but don't let yourself use any items. Never buy them in the first place! Or don't let yourself use Oatchi at all. Or never collect any Flarlic, so you have to make due with just a tiny team of 'min for the whole run. I'm excited to see what people come up with!

A TRULY PACKED-IN PIKMIN

There are still other ways to play! Pikmin 4 is honestly jam-packed with different modes and things to do. The Night Expeditions are another new addition, and they offer truly tense tower defense. Swarms of aggressive enemies assaults your Lumiknoll locations, and you have to fend them off with the help of Oatchi and the new Glow Pikmin – it's often edge-of-your-seat, panic-inducing stuff, but it feels great when you emerge victorious. And like the Dandori scenes, these are fully integrated into the story too, as clearing Night Expeditions gives you the medicine you need to cure the Leaflings you rescue after winning in those Dandori modes. It all feeds back into itself!

Even Captain Olimar's side mode! There's kind of a soft remake of the Pikmin 1 campaign included here in Pikmin 4 – but this time you've only got 15 days to gather his 30 ship parts! Eek! It's yet another great addition.

And that's what I kept thinking over and over while playing the game: "This is great!" Nintendo's designers really went back and took a hard look at every part of Pikmin and reimagined it all, adding way more polish and not ignoring the importance of any tiny bit of the gameplay. Pikmin 4 is a joy to play. It looks amazing. It's perfect for everyone from longtime adult fans to brand-new players – even my 5-year-old, Cooper, has started his own file! Maybe mastering Dandori at such a young age will make him an efficiency expert for life! **– LUCAS**

10

7.0

Investigation Meets Precipitation

MASTER DETECTIVE ARCHIVES: RAIN CODE

YUMA KOKOHEAD HAS got some problems. Not only is he thrust into a train murder mystery where he's the most likely suspect, but he's suffering from amnesia . . . oh, and he's also being haunted by a frisky, meddlesome spirit!

Yuma fills the role of the detective-in-training hero of Master Detective Archives: Rain Code, the Switch's latest mystery adventure. Most of the game takes place in the isolated Kanai Ward, a perpetually rainy city full of secrets and conspiracies. Unlike past clue collectors like Phoenix Wright and Professor Layton, Yuma explores fully 3D environments on foot in his never-ending search for the truth.

This element of gameplay feels like an evolution of the earlier visual novel approach to these types of stories and helps provide immersion. Between big plot points, players can chat up the locals, search for optional goodies and take on sidequests – although the sluggish loading screens between areas hurt my desire to do so.

The cases themselves are a mixed bunch. While you do get suitable clues for the culprits (I was able to guess about half of them, which is an enjoyable ratio, I'd say), the killers' motivations are all over the place. One chapter may end in a clever and emotional reveal that recontextualizes the story, while the next features a perp who I barely know or care about, and had little reason to commit the crime. The dialogue can be reasonably funny and is very well acted, but it also shares an issue with many other story-based games where lines, sentiments and traits will repeat ad nauseam. (Yes, I get your character's little quirk is to act this way . . . can we move on, please!?)

Likewise, the characters are similarly uneven. Yuma makes for a likable and endearing protagonist, and he'll often play straight man to his ghost partner, Shinigami. Shinigami is the closest thing that Rain Code has to a breakout star, simultaneously filling in the roles of silly puffball mascot, quirky assistant and fanservice anime babe. Your mileage may vary on her flirty, gauche and/or playful dialogue, but I found her reasonably entertaining for the most part, and she goes through some decent development. I was less enthused about most of the other lead characters, who I feel got shortchanged due to a lack of screen time and interaction, and as a result could've used more depth.

The reason Yuma and Shinigami hog the spotlight is due to the Mystery Labyrinth sections of Rain Code. These dreamlike dungeons appear at the end of each of the game's cases and provide the bulk of the problem-solving. You may have to choose the right answer represented in a set of doors, or battle a phantom obscuring the truth to the case by pointing out his contradictions. Fans of the Danganronpa series (which this is essentially a spiritual sequel to) will feel right at home in these minigames, which serve as a vibrant and surreal way to sort out the details of each mystery. A downside is that few other characters can enter the labyrinth.

Capping off these sequences, the game also raises some big questions about the ethics of killing a murderer, but it doesn't commit to the theme and just kind of drops it. To that end, the plot admittedly takes some time to get interesting and requires a lot of patience. Too many silly, unbelievable things happen early on; character motivations are chaotic (if you want to shoot your hostages, why not shoot them, instead of just talking about shooting them for five minutes!?), relationships and power dynamics are inconsistent and it can get tiresome waiting for story beats to pay off. But I have to say, it won me over in the end with a risky late-game reveal that nevertheless worked with the story and answered most of the threads in a compelling and frankly insane manner.

Ultimately, Rain Code is an interesting game that swings big and makes a few whiffs in the process. While some chunks of the game can be a real slog, I appreciate its fearlessness in setting up crazy twists and experimenting with the mechanics of the visual novel subgenre. **— MATTHEW T.**

SWITCH PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER: SPIKE CHUNSOFT RATING: M

Farm Livin' is the Life for Me

STORY OF SEASONS: A WONDERFUL LIFE

OVER 20 YEARS ago, Harvest Moon: A Wonderful Life and its follow-up Another Wonderful Life were released with great acclaim on the Nintendo GameCube. I never got to experience either one of those titles when they originally came out, so I was excited to hear that they would get an updated, combined rerelease under the Story of Seasons banner. As my farmer began her life in Forgotten Valley, I began to see exactly why the Wonderful Life games were so well received – for their time. This modern version holds up, but it wasn't exactly my cup of tea, especially now in an era when we're getting a farming game (sometimes more than one!) announced in every Nintendo Direct.

Life in isolated Forgotten Valley is pretty easy – you start out with two fields, a pasture and a free cow. There are fish to catch, flowers and herbs to pick, a place to dig for treasure, crops for every season and a town filled with friendly faces and eight potential marriage partners. Best of all, the seasons are only 10 days long. Sounds great, doesn't it? Well . . .

The truth is, Forgotten Valley is boring. There's barely anything to do aside from the activities I listed above, and they get repetitive quickly. There are minigames, but unlocking them requires either weeks of work or being at the right place at the right time. And because of the short seasonal calendars, there's only a handful of town-wide festivals, and birthdays aren't even celebrated.

This is where the main focus of A Wonderful Life comes in: Instead of farming and making money, it's all about forming bonds and raising a family, and how your family dynamic affects your child's development. Will they decide to leave and pursue a career, or stay and take over the farm after you retire? Aside from a few progress bars on your child's status menu, there's hardly any guidance or hints on how to bring your child up to the career your spouse thinks would be perfect for them – but then again, isn't that what real life is like? Having a child who actually grows up and isn't just an interactive background object was one of the best things to happen to this franchise, and I wish it was revisited in the later games as well. The weirdest part is that while your kid grows up, and you and your spouse grow old together, aging doesn't affect everyone in Forgotten Valley.

One other mechanic that I especially liked was the hybrid crop mechanic, despite only being able to create one bag of seeds at a time. At one point, you meet Vinnie, a very chatty three-headed plant. He's able to turn crops and seeds into various hybrids, as well as perform upgrades to your seeds, like making them grow year-round. Natsume would eventually revisit the hybrid concept with their games developed under the Harvest Moon IP, but I wish this had been used in more Story of Seasons games.

The UI is simple and intuitive, and a square around a crop you've planted changes color when it's ready to harvest. The only thing missing: an on-screen gauge for the watering can.

As much as I would've liked to enjoy A Wonderful Life more, it was way too much of a slog for me. If you were a fan of the original and want to see how well this holds up, or you're looking for a farming sim that won't overwhelm you with content, this could be your best bet, but you might do better with Friends of Mineral Town – it's got the same nostalgia factor with modern updates, has more to do in terms of extra activities and has townsfolk with a lot more personality than Forgotten Valley's. **– REBECCA**

SWITCH PUBLISHER: XSEED
DEVELOPER: MARVELOUS
RATING: E

7.0

10

Three Trails to Walk at Once

THE LEGEND OF HEROES: TRAILS INTO REVERIE

I DON'T THINK I've ever played a game that rewards long-time fans of a series more than Trails into Reverie. Serving as an epilogue to several entries that came before it, it provides callbacks and conclusions to a massive cast of 50-plus characters, while continuing what makes the Trails series so special.

Trails into Reverie is the 10th entry in Nihon Falcom's long-running interconnected role-playing series. While the games may have different settings, conflicts and casts, they're all part of a much larger narrative – characters from previous entries return, and the lore gets more intricate as time goes on.

(That said, Trails into Reverie is not a good entry point into the series. Trails in the Sky, Trails from Zero or Trails of Cold Steel are all fine places to start.)

Trails into Reverie features a combo of new and old elements from the series. Together, they help the game succeed in tying up loose ends from Trails from Zero, Trails to Azure and Trails of Cold Steel 1-4 and setting the stage for future games – namely Kuro no Kiseki, which has yet to be released in the West.

Let's start with the new. Trails into Reverie is the first game to include the Trails to Walk system with multiple protagonists. Throughout the story, you take on the roles of Trails from Zero protagonist Lloyd Bannings, Trails of Cold Steel protagonist Rean Schwarzer and the mysteriously named C, who each have their own route in the story. Within each chapter, you have some freedom to switch between the routes.

Trails to Walk keeps the pacing of Reverie's narrative going strong. It never felt bloated or stagnant, and that's been an issue with previous games. I was especially impressed with C's route. It featured amazing new characters who offered a morally grey perspective. Up until Reverie, the main heroes of Trails have been mainly trustworthy and kind – C and his allies provide a much-needed contrast and show that the Trails universe needs anti-heroes, too.

Another defining feature of Reverie is its ever-expanding dungeon called the True Reverie Corridor. Trails in the Sky the 3rd had a similar dungeon-crawling element, and the True Reverie Corridor is definitely the spiritual successor to it.

The True Reverie Corridor provides the key to giving each member of this gigantic cast a moment to shine. As you explore, you can customize your party with characters from past games, fight monsters and collect orbs. These orbs allow you to unlock gear, minigames, characters and, most importantly, character episodes called Daydreams.

I'm not exaggerating when I say the Daydreams were my favorite part of Reverie. They provide glimpses into the lives of the Trails cast and range from hilarious to emotional. In one Daydream, two coffee lovers investigated some missing espresso beans, and in another, one character gets to hear an encouraging message from her father who passed away a few months prior.

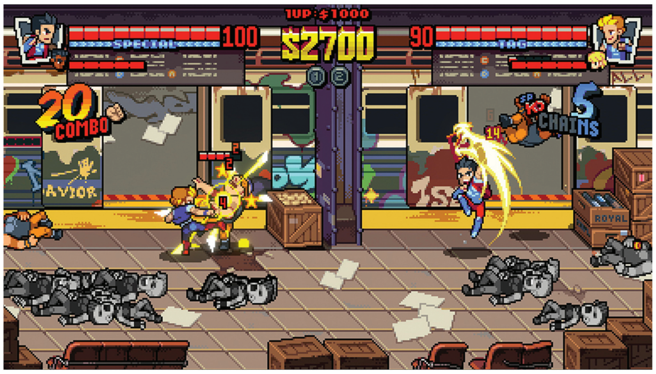
In terms of combat, Reverie's turn-based system is similar to that of Trails of Cold Steel III and IV. You have character-specific Crafts and elemental Arts at your disposal, and enemies have a Break gauge that can put them in a weakened state when it's reduced.

Reverie adds United Fronts into the mix, which let you employ group attacks, Arts and heals. I could see them becoming a bit broken on easier difficulties, but they came in handy for me while playing on Hard. Reverie has several bosses that don't pull punches, and I enjoyed the challenge.

The only issue I had with Reverie involved its Switch performance. Loading times were frequent, especially during major cutscenes. I also experienced frame drops in those moments. While I enjoyed being able to play Reverie on the go, there were some prices to pay for that. It's something to consider since the game is also available on PS4, PS5 and PC.

When it comes to Reverie, the more Trails games you've played, the more you're going to get out of it – and wow does it deliver if you've stuck with the series for years! **– MAGGIE**

SWITCH PUBLISHER: NIS AMERICA
DEVELOPER: NIHON FALCOM
RATING: T



Back on the Streets with the Lee Brothers

DOUBLE DRAGON GAIDEN: RISE OF THE DRAGONS

BEING A DOUBLE DRAGON fan can be quite a ride. Sometimes the series goes on hiatus for a decade, only to come back with a brilliant reinvention like Double Dragon Neon . . . that's then followed by something dreadfully uninspired like Double Dragon IV. Sometimes you get one of the best remakes of all time in Double Dragon Advance, and then a generation later one of the worst in Double Dragon II: Wander of the Dragons. But sometimes you get something completely different: Something that takes the basic Double Dragon formula and truly tries to do something new with it. Sometimes it's a complete disaster like Double Dragon V. But this time we got Double Dragon Gaiden, a game that easily ranks among the highest of high points that this rollercoaster of a franchise has ever seen.

The core of Double Dragon usually centers around two martial arts experts, Billy and Jimmy Lee, beating up various gangs. That holds true with Gaiden, except now the initial roster also includes Marian, longtime damsel in distress turned weapons expert, and Uncle Matin, an all-new "heavy" character whose name is a cheeky reference to the original arcade release. The game allows you to unlock nine more characters, including franchise mainstays Linda, Chin and Abobo, and even the new bosses. What makes this roster so special is that everyone's movesets are surprisingly distinct, even the Lee brothers: Marian is all about range, Abobo is a tank, Matin has a riot shield and so on.

But no matter who you choose to run with, the game is all about combos and teamwork. Every run starts by choosing a partner who you can tag in at almost any time. Every punch you throw starts a combo ticker, and making it go higher will net you more cash and recharge your special meter, which can be used to either summon your partner or launch special moves. Finishing off a whole group of enemies at once with a special will net you healing items, which you'll need, because this game is tough – a clear homage to its arcade roots.

Another is the way it encourages replayability. In the old days, you'd plunk however many quarters you had into a machine and see how far you could get, learning as you played. The next time, you'd bring more quarters and improve until eventually you got good enough to beat the game. Gaiden creatively attempts to recreate that experience with a ton of variety. Besides multiple characters, you can also choose which order you play the four main stages in.

Whenever you beat one, the others get longer and tougher, encouraging players to experiment with different combinations. There's also a leveling system where cash earned during stages can be used to purchase individual upgrades, or traded in for tokens to unlock bonus content like new characters.

These features are all brilliant, but the most important thing that this game gets right is just how good it feels to play. The hits all have a great, tactile feel that's so important in brawlers.

There are lots of small nitpicks like occasional camera issues, some astronomical load times and a bizarre inability to run vertically – and I really don't care for the art direction – but this game is so much fun to play that no matter how annoying those issues got, they never ruined the experience.

Double Dragon Gaiden: Rise of the Dragons is one of the most entertaining brawlers out there right now, and considering its company, that's high praise. Developer Secret Base has hit on something special here, and I can't wait to see what they do next! **– KRIS**

8.0

SWITCH PUBLISHER: MODUS GAMES
DEVELOPER: SECRET BASE
RATING: E10+

David Oxford is #ALLELITE

AEW: FIGHT FOREVER

FOR THE LAST two decades, WWE has been virtually uncontested in the world of professional wrestling – whether it be on television, the toy aisle or video games. Some independent federations have risen and fallen in that time, but none have ever truly come close to approaching "the E" as a true competitor. That is, until 2019, when All Elite Wrestling was formed!

While nowhere near WWE's market saturation or notoriety, AEW is the closest anyone has come in a long time to acting as a true rival and alternative for Vince McMahon's brand of sports entertainment. And with renowned video game lover and acclaimed wrestling icon Kenny Omega in the position of executive vice president for the brand, fans knew it was only a matter of time before AEW would bring out a video game of its very own.

It took a while, though – long enough that some people started calling this game "AEW: Take Forever."

SWITCH PUBLISHER: THQ NORDIC DEVELOPER: YUKE'S RATING: T

Development of the game has been in the works for nearly as long as the company itself has been around. And in an interesting swerve, AEW was able to secure Yuke's, the longtime developer of 2K Games' (and before that, THQ's) WWE titles, to hit the digital mat.

One thing should probably be noted up front: If you're reading this and you play no other consoles than Nintendo, then AEW is less an alternative to WWE, and more like your only option. While WWE/WWF games have been featured on Nintendo platforms and Nintendo Power covers going all the way back to the era of Hulkamania in the '80s, the Switch has only seen *two* WWE games: 2K18 and 2020's WWE 2K Battlegrounds. To put it another way, on Switch, AEW: Fight Forever effectively wins by count-out.

That said, even if the newest WWE titles were here, Fight Forever still provides a rather different experience than fans of Yuke's previous work might be expecting. Rather than creating a realistic sports simulation of an unrealistic, predetermined athletic event, AEW:FF leans more into the absurdity of wrestling in some subtle (and not-so-subtle) ways. Foremost is a more pick-up-and-play, arcade-y style of gameplay that one could compare to Super Smash Bros., wherein most everyone plays with the same set of inputs, but the results vary by character. This harks back to the developers' main source of inspiration: the Nintendo 64 titles such as WWF No Mercy. As Nadia and I played on stream, she was able to keep up with me and even beat me at times, despite never having played one of these games before.

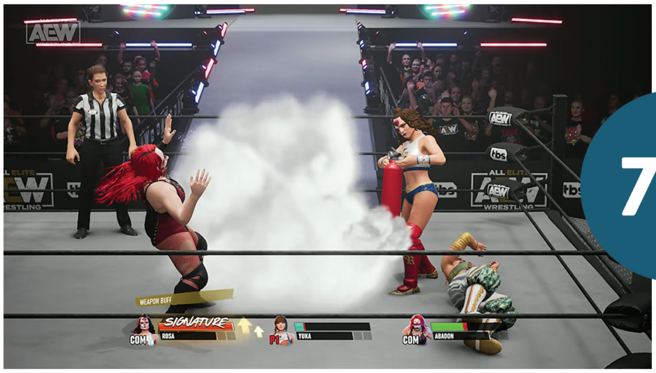
To that same point, graphics are made to be a little less realistic, and as such, these video game characters look like . . . well, video game characters. They generally look good across the board, though an odd camera angle or lighting can make them look a bit strange. But hey, isn't that true of real life to some degree, too? I'd say it keeps more consistent than the WWE games I've played, where it seems some models receive more attention than others.

Sound is good, if a bit barren at times. The music's volume is set so low by default I could barely hear it, while commentary only speaks up at the beginning and end of matches. Every theme song is here (ostensibly; haven't gotten "Jane" to play for Orange Cassidy, for some reason), but the entrances are so brief that you won't get too much enjoyment from them outside of the create-a-wrestler menu. Speaking of which, the CAW suite here is . . . adequate. Myself and others have been able to recreate how we look IRL to an acceptable degree, but it doesn't approach the sheer insanity we've come to expect from other games over the years.

That's probably the main takeaway from AEW: Fight Forever as a whole: What it does, it does well (occasional, brief chugging on the Switch aside), but it doesn't do a whole lot of it.

It's replayable, especially with friends handy, but most of its promise seems to lie ahead with DLC, as AEW intends to support it for a while yet. (Let's just hope that DLC development doesn't "Take Forever" now that the base game is finally complete.)

But for now, it's a small, simple and somewhat-satisfying package for anyone ready for a break from WWE's wrestling entertainment. **– DAVID**



7.0

The Sequel We Almost Never Got to See

EVERYBODY 1-2-SWITCH!

I FULLY EXPECTED to hate this game. The moment I saw its mascot, MC Horace, it looked like a decidedly bad time. I mean, look at this thing – this isn't the caliber of character Nintendo would normally come up with on their worst day. It's literally the horse mask that's been appearing in Internet memes as far back as 2009 slapped onto a generic guy in a purple suit jacket. Even Party Phil from Wii Party was a more inspired design! So as I booted the game up, I was positive that no good would come of it.

Boy was I wrong.

Well, almost. MC Horace is in fact awful. But outside of that, I honestly can't believe how much fun this game can be in the right setting. Emphasis on the "right setting" though, because with the wrong crowd, it can be a real slog.

In case you've never heard of this game or its predecessor, 1-2-Switch, it's a party game that focuses on a series of absurd minigames that make use of the Joy-Cons. This time around there are games about dancing aliens, googly-eyed balloons and personal trainers who really want you to do squats. They're relatively simple activities to wrap your head around, and it does a good job of explaining the instructions before each round starts.

Players are split into teams, and the one with the most minigame victories at the end wins. It's Mario Party-esque in that this can easily devolve into a game of pure luck, which can be both hilarious and frustrating. If, say, your team is beating the other by several points, they will be given a special minigame where if they pick the right card, it will automatically tie things back up, or even give them some sort of crazy advantage. It's completely unfair, but again, in the right setting, it can be as funny as it is infuriating.

To put the game through its paces, I tried it in two different settings: One with my wife and two kids, and one with my wife and three other adult friends. First, I played with the kids, and it didn't go great.

The thing about these minigames is that many of them require the player to perform specific movements. In the the alien abduction game, you have to wave your arms back and forth with a specific rhythm. Except these movements aren't very accurate when performed with a Joy-Con, so no matter how perfectly you appear to be doing, the game can easily just not recognize it – and let me tell you, a 9-year-old and a 6-year-old don't take too kindly to that. Add in games about twitch reflexes and trivia and yeah, the kids weren't amused.

With the adults though, things went much better, especially when we tried using our phones. With Joy-Cons, up to eight players are supported, but with phones, it actually goes up to 100. Many of the games stayed the same, but some seemed way easier when everyone had their own screen. Other phone-specific games were surprisingly clever, like the fashion designer game that requires everyone to take a picture of their environment to try to match a specific color.

This game is stupid, but I don't mean that as an insult. (Except for MC Horace. He's terrible). It's the kind of thing that on the surface seems like mindless fun, but quickly becomes challenging and entertaining in the right setting. The UI is simple to use, and connecting our phones to the Switch was so easy I can't believe Nintendo hasn't done it more often. It's definitely not for "everybody" as the name implies, but for what it is, it's surprisingly good fun. **– KRIS**

SWITCH PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER: NINTENDO RATING: E

7.5

Ryza's Final Adventure

ATELIER RYZA 3: ALCHEMIST OF THE END & THE SECRET KEY

GUST AND KOEI TECMO'S Atelier Ryza 3 follows the adventures of alchemist Reisalin Stout (Ryza to her pals) as she and her friends explore a mysterious set of islands that have suddenly appeared off the coast of her home, Kurken Island. As she and her buddies investigate, they discover an even bigger mystery: the "Code of the Universe."

For the uninitiated, the Atelier RPGs largely involve alchemy, which is a fancy way of saying "item creation." Atelier Ryza 3 is my first experience with any of the Atelier games, so I didn't know quite what to expect, other than the role-playing aspects, which I'm quite familiar with. I'm glad I played it; this game is fantastic!

To start off, this game is huge! It's a (mostly) open-world-styled adventure, and the various locales are unique and colorful. Traveling around Ryza's world is easy to do, especially with its fully integrated fast travel. Considering the size of the map, this was a definite necessity. It's easy to use, and you will definitely be using it, as revisiting past areas is a requirement for harvesting resources for conducting your alchemical experiments.

Speaking of alchemy, it makes up a large portion of the game, and for a neophyte such as myself it took a little getting used to until I understood just what I was doing. Once I realized what I could accomplish with creating everything used in the game, I was hooked. Except for your starting items, you make ALL of the things you will be using during your playthrough – including weapons, armor, magic items, healing potions . . . everything. That's not a bad thing (and is the main thrust behind the game, natch). But the alchemy here is ridiculously deep, to the point it can be overwhelming if you're not willing to spend enough time to see what it can offer.

As an example of what's possible, I'm able to alchemize stronger versions of the starting weapons that outstrip the second-level versions. Add battle effects and traits to each of your items, and you can have some weapons of mass destruction on your hands! This also applies to everything else you can make, so you can really go nuts here. Luckily the ingredients needed are wisely spread out around the lands you explore, so you won't be able to overpower your assailants easily right from the start.

One new concept found in Ryza 3 is the ability to create magical keys. These elemental keys can do many different things, from unlocking new areas and special supply boxes found littered across the land to enhancing your alchemy and contributing to your success during fights. Keys can be created in many different ways, and the way you create them can provide extra effects for both adventuring and battling.

I did have an issue with the combat portion for the first few hours. While there are plentiful tutorials on all of the aspects of fighting, they don't do a good job of really explaining what to do. There are more combat options here than are necessary, and having so many choices makes it a bit confusing when you're in the heat of battle. The more I played, the more I understood – but I shouldn't have to fumble my way through the first couple hours before getting clued into what's going on and what I'm supposed to do.

An aspect I really liked was the interplay of Ryza and her friends. Many of the characters return from past Atelier Ryza games, and they all act like old buddies. They talk about other characters from the past, joke with each other and really seem like they're a tight-knit circle of friends. Newer characters are welcomed into the family with open arms and become enjoyable parts of the overall story too. The storytelling here is not heavy or dark; it's nicely paced and is a joy to experience. I had a great time with Atelier Ryza 3 and am looking forward to playing its DLC once I have a chance to grab it! **– THOR**

9.0

SWITCH PUBLISHER: KOEI TECMO
DEVELOPER: GUST RATING: T

Burst Bubbles with Bub & Bob (& Mom!)

PUZZLE BOBBLE EVERYBUBBLE!

PUZZLE BOBBLE, also known as Bust-A-Move, first launched in arcades in 1994. Back then, most puzzle games worked on some variation of the "rotate falling objects and arrange them in a way that makes them disappear" theme that Tetris begat. Puzzle Bobble, spun off of the Bubble Bobble series, stood out from that crowd, and it still does today. Instead of spinning objects as they fall down, you shoot bubbles up and make them pop. Match three or more of the same color and they explode, causing anything hanging from them to disappear too. Refining your aiming skills while honing your overall screen-clearing strategies makes for an easy-to-learn, hard-to-master formula that's kept the franchise alive for almost 30 years now.

That's a long time to iterate on the same basic mechanics. Keeping things fresh, while fending off competition from clones like Snood and Angry Birds Pop, hasn't always been easy for Puzzle Bobble. Over that time, the series has gone online, dabbled in VR and even took a trip to space! These variations and innovations have been enough to keep the series afloat, but not enough to put it back on top.

Puzzle Bobble Everybubble! tries to blow up in a bigger way by offering four-player co-op and competitive play, a first for the franchise. Inviting friends, families and even AI helpers to team up or tussle doesn't fundamentally change the game, but it does change who can play it.

My 83-year-old mother is living proof. She's been a Puzzle Bobble fan from the beginning, but like many people her age, her hand-eye coordination and cognition aren't what they used to be. Earlier this year, these changes in her functionality led to a sad day for the family, when she handed her DS and GBA over to me, asking me to find a new home for them. Playing them on her own had gotten too hard, and asking for help was embarrassing. But last weekend, I brought over this new Puzzle Bobble and activated three AI players to back her up in co-op, and it was just like old times. Maybe she wasn't the same bubble-busting dynamo she was in her 50s, but she wasn't getting Game Overs either. In its own way, the computer-controlled assistants of Puzzle Bobble Everybubble! allowed her to hit continue on her love of gaming. (For that, she gives it a 9.0.)

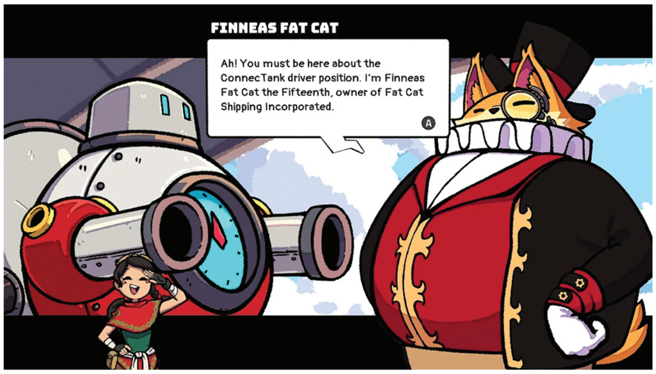
I'll always love this game for allowing my Mom to feel more like her old self again, but I also have to caution folks away from buying it for its full $40 asking price unless they are hardcore party puzzle maniacs. If you aren't playing two-or-more player co-op or competitively, the only truly new thing about Puzzle Bubble Everybubble! is a simple-but-novel Puzzle Bobble Vs. Space Invaders side game. It plays like a perfect cross between the two classic Taito franchises, but with up to four players. Unfortunately, it's even more slow-paced than classic Space Invaders, causing it to drag a bit after the initial wow factor subsides. Seeing these two different iconic titles collide is a sweet treat, but the flavor fades quickly.

My time alone with Puzzle Bobble Everybubble! felt a bit dried out. But the experience of watching my Mom play it independently, and laugh with pride when she survived level after level, was priceless. Combining her 9.0 with my more middling score of a 7.0 gives us an average of 8.0. But feel free to let your opinion side more with her point of view or mine: Everybubble will hit different for everybody.

– JONATHAN

8.0

SWITCH PUBLISHER: ININ GAMES
DEVELOPER: TAITO RATING: E



Tank You Very Much!

CONNECTANK

AFTER SPENDING SEVERAL weeks' worth of late-night game sessions accomplishing full clears of both story campaigns in Advance Wars 1+2: Re-Boot Camp, I was still in the mood for more warfare. So I reached into my backlog to pull out a different kind of tank combat game that's been sitting untouched for nearly two years now: ConnecTank!

It's really not anything like Advance Wars. The better comparison is the DS classic Dragon Quest Heroes: Rocket Slime, the 2006 spin-off of the DQ series that had you playing as a simple slime commanding a massive tank in one-on-one battles against other massive tanks. (Rocket's game had a lot of adventure aspects in it too, but ConnecTank focuses entirely on the tank combat.)

You're cast as an engineer running around inside a humongous war machine to make sure all of its inner workings are working right. It's a job that demands a multitasking mind, and is also split into a couple of different phases.

When a battle first begins, your role is assembling a conveyor belt to link together the device that spits out ammunition and the cannon that then fires that ammo toward the enemy. It's a trickier puzzle challenge than you'd expect at first glance, as an array of different straight and curved pieces of belt are littered around the unorganized innards of the tank, and you have to sort through the mess, decide which pieces you need and which you don't, and get them rotated and placed in the proper spots as fast as possible. Meanwhile, the enemy engineers in the opposing vehicle are busy doing the same thing on their end – and whoever finishes building their conveyor first will be able to launch the first strike in the second, primary phase of the fight . . .

Firing off tons of different kinds of ammo! When your belt is built, your job changes: You become responsible for gathering up pieces of scrap that pop out of a generator and combining them to make effective ordnance to send flying toward your foe. There are three colors of scrap – red, yellow and blue – and the order in which you pick up and toss them into the recycling machine matters. Two reds together will build a red cannonball; two blues a blue. That's the most basic. But some bullets call for one red and one yellow, or some other combo of colors, and if you don't pay attention to the current trio of ammo recipes scrolling above your character's head, you may end up with ineffective junk bullets that don't do much damage and are fairly worthless on defense as well.

. . . And that's another thing you have to keep an eye on! The enemy tank is hurling its own attacks toward you while you're working, and the only way to protect your tank from losing HP is to counter their bullets with the proper colors of your own. It's a rock/paper/scissors system: Blue beats red, red beats yellow and yellow beats blue. If blue bullets are inbound, hurry and build some yellows to fight back!

ConnecTank finds its fun in frenzy. The frantic dash to get your line running well, while simultaneously attacking, while simultaneously defending – it can get addicting! And later levels of course add even more complexity, with monsters that show up in your space to mess with you, fires you have to put out and more.

But then you could always counter with more complexity of your own: by bringing in more players to share the workload! Up to four engineers can join in at once, and that gets to be extra silly if you've got the right group. ConnecTank could help you build better friend connections! (Though it's local co-op online – no online here.)

I did have some frustration with the controls, as the game demands more precision than it should. (If I'm holding a piece of scrap and I run to dunk it into the recycler, I want it to actually go in there! Not be set down in the space right next to it, game!) There's also not much else to do beyond going from one battle to the next. There's a bit of tank customization as you earn new parts and new varieties of ammo, but it's largely just a linear run of fight after fight.

But the game's also cheap! Just $20 on Amazon as of this writing. For that price, it's a blast! **– LUCAS**

SWITCH PUBLISHER: NATSUME DEVELOPERS: TAMATIN ENT. & YUMMYYUMMYTUMMY RATING: E

7.5

> *The Legend of Zelda: Tears of the Kingdom* is such a massive adventure that last issue's single review just won't do! Here are six additional opinions for you to peruse! – **LUCAS**

SECOND OPINION
A SKYWARD SWORD SEQUEL?

THERE ARE TWO camps of Zelda fans: Breath of the Wild lovers, and people who didn't like it enough to complete it. That's part of why long, arduous games like Grand Theft Auto V, Skyrim and Breath of the Wild get so many 10/10 review scores: The only people who are willing to play them to "the end" are the ones who are destined to love them.

The same thing happened with reviews for Tears of the Kingdom. The bulk of critique out there was penned by people who loved Breath of the Wild in particular, and massive, non-linear games in general. As someone in the second camp, that means few of those reviews are for me. I got bored with Breath of the Wild after about 20 hours. On the other hand, I loved Skyward Sword, as well as Majora's Mask and Link's Awakening. For me, Zelda games are at their best when they're semi-linear, give you new powers at a steady pace and are packed with finely curated puzzles, action setpieces and quirky NPCs to assist.

The amazing thing about Tears of the Kingdom is that it's a fantastic sequel to Breath of the Wild, but it contains an even better sequel to Skyward Sword inside it. If you choose to play it Breath of the Wild-style, you can wander around and do whatever you want, craft countless kinds of machines of your choosing and just generally goof around for a very long time. But if, like me, you want to keep things focused, you can follow the main path of the game, jumping from one relatively small, finely crafted area to the next, each encouraging intimate, ingeniously thought-out interactions with the environment. It took me about 50 hours to "win" Tears of the Kingdom, by shamelessly using guides whenever I got stuck for more than 20 minutes, bypassing most of the optional content, skipping the Autobuild acquisition quests, escaping from every Gleeok, Lynel and Frox I encountered and generally speedrunning from place to place. Using Ascend to get to high spots and paraglide to new areas was also a massive time saver. It all helped to make my fun-moments-per-minute ratio way higher than it was in Breath of the Wild.

Not only is the game more densely packed with things to do, but it's also way more populated with lovable NPCs. While its predecessor was a largely solitary expedition through a post-apocalyptic world, Tears of the Kingdom shows the people of Hyrule spreading out and making the land their own again (with a hero's help of course). Like in traditional Zelda games, Link gets amazing new powers as he progresses, but now they come from the party of friends he makes along the way.

Despite still being a little long-winded and obtuse at times, Tears of the Kingdom has more than enough to bring this lapsed Zelda fan back into the fold. – **JONATHAN**

THIRD OPINION
EASY ISSUES STILL ABOUND

FOLLOWING UP ON Breath of the Wild was always going to be a challenge, and surpassing it nigh impossible. That game was lightning in a bottle, and even if Tears of the Kingdom had knocked it out of the park in terms of addressing its predecessor's issues, recapturing that specific magic would be no easy task. That Tears of the Kingdom comes as close as it does is nothing short of a miracle, and I'm beyond thrilled that it even exists.

I was afraid it would feel too much like the last game, or that I wouldn't be able to immerse myself in it the way I did before. Open-world games have never clicked with me – even the ones considered the best in the genre – but Breath of the Wild hooked me completely, to the point where, for months, playing it was the first thing I did in the morning and the last thing I did at night. Tears of the Kingdom is an amazing game that improves on what came before it in so many clever ways that I am again in a constant state of wanting to play it. So much so that finding time to play through the other games I needed to write about for this very magazine became slightly problematic!

But for as much as I adore this game, I'm equally in awe at the incredibly easy-to-address issues that continue to hold it back, starting with weapon degradation. I can not for the life of me understand why after near-universal revilement of this system in the previous game, they've done almost nothing to correct it. Fusing barely extends the life of most weapons at all. I understand the point is to force players to experiment, but how hard would it have been to at least double how long it takes for everything to break? Surely that would have alleviated the problem in some way. Weapons breaking has sucked so much fun out of so many situations during my playtime and I can not fathom why it wasn't addressed further.

The other loudest complaint about Breath of the Wild was its lack of proper dungeons, and while the temples on hand in Tears of the Kingdom are a big improvement over the Divine Beasts, they're still a far cry from what the series was previously known for.

The story, while in no means bad, is another letdown, especially the way it's handled in terms of it being discoverable out of chronological order. There aren't that many of these cinematics in the game, and not having variations that don't repeat the same information and treat things you already know as massive discoveries is shocking.

For such a smart game, it's baffling that these issues, which seem like they'd be easy to overcome, are still in place, leaving it falling just short of its potential. It's missing that special something that made Breath of the Wild the generation-defining experience it was. – **KRIS**

FOURTH OPINION
A DISLIKE OF LIKE LIKES

DEAR WHOEVER DESIGNED the Like Likes in The Legend of Zelda: Tears of the Kingdom: I WANT A WORD WITH YOU, RIGHT NOW.

And that's one of my two main complaints. Everything else is like Breath of the Wild turned up to 11 – from the rogues gallery including more familiar faces (Gleeoks!) to the fact that we got *three whole maps* to explore. I enjoyed exploring the Water Temple with Sidon at my side. And exploring the Depths, with its almost pitch darkness and "broken heart" mechanic, made me remember the tension I felt exploring high-level dungeons in the original Legend of Zelda as a kid. It's also been fun to grab a horse from the stable and ride around listening to "Mister Rogers music," as my husband once described it when I was playing Breath of the Wild. I really can't complain that we're getting a lot of reused music when it worked so well in the original, and some of the remixed themes for the areas in crisis, like Zora's Domain, really add to the atmosphere of uncertainty.

I'm barely even halfway through the main storyline, thanks to all the exploration and other sidequests I've busied myself with. There are caves, wells, giant Nazca lines (that's what I call them) and a whole bunch of new recipes (I haven't been able to open the Hyrule House of Pizza yet), but the best new features are Link's Ultrahand and Fuse powers. I've seen a bunch of great creations online that are just plain fun, like a Korok rotisserie (seriously, look it up), but most of mine have just been utilitarian (like random clumps of wood to hold up the Hudson Construction signs), and they've allowed me to not only think outside of the box, but to brute-force my way through several puzzles and travel to different locations. The only downside of this is that I wish parts were easier to get than through the gacha machines – steering columns are amazingly useful, but I haven't been able to find any that aren't already part of a construction yet.

If there's one other thing that I disliked, it's the fact that I found out a major plot point fairly early in my adventure – not through an online spoiler, but through viewing a memory of the past, which are scattered across the map like Link's memories were in the original. These can be discovered in any order, and it was just my luck of the draw that I stumbled on one that was fairly spoiler-heavy. It didn't affect how much I enjoyed playing, but it did make me wonder if the programmers accounted for already knowing important information as you interact with the people directly affected by it.

It's been over three years since I rolled credits on Breath of the Wild, so while going back to Hyrule felt familiar, the changes to the land-scape made it look and feel so much more different. **– REBECCA**

FIFTH OPINION
THIS IS MUST-HAVE FUN!

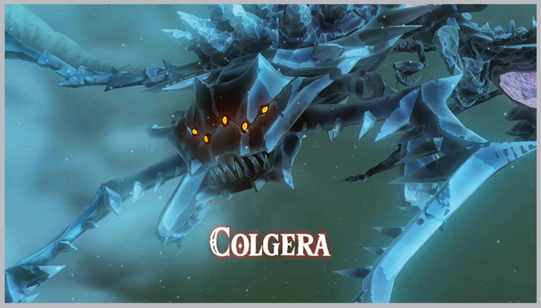
NARRATIVELY SPEAKING, the tale told in Tears of the Kingdom far surpasses the one in Breath of the Wild. I was more invested in Zelda's story, and the real danger of seeing the Master Sword and Link's arm get decimated by a significantly weakened (and dehydrated) Ganondorf sent chills down my spine.

The starting tutorial Sky Islands were admittedly slow and lacked pacing, but the game quickly became amazing. I also had a hard time adjusting to the fact that everything seemed much harder in Hyrule proper, because most monsters could kill Link handily and most of the weapons were rusty disasters. I was used to easily dispatching foes, so I had to adjust my mentality like I was once again stuck on Eventide Island with all my gear mysteriously stolen.

I love that the game slowly opened up the world, as it is quite intimi-dating having two full-sized maps, with Sky Islands on top of that! Of course you could again ignore the narrative's way of introducing things, but it was masterful how they eased me into the gameplay once I was back in Hyrule. Once I traveled to the underground, I immediately thought, "Gee, someone was inspired by Stranger Things!" A totally dark, upside-down version of the world where weird atmospheric spores float in the air and landmarks like shrines and rivers are mirrored by Lightroots and mountains? The game as a whole was just more dangerous too, and I loved that. Gloom-corrupted and armored enemies added challenge, and fighting the Gleeoks was great. The return of the Yiga Clan was brilliant too!

Several complaints from Breath of the Wild were addressed. Weapon breaking may have been exacerbated by the Great Rusting, but Link can easily make new weapons with Fuse, so the developers made weapons more accessible. The lack of things to do in the overworld was solved, because every time I had an objective in mind I would get dis-tracted with 10 other tasks along the way like a caffeine-addled squirrel. Getting Koroks together and helping Addison were my least favorite distractions, but Addison's challenges were at least unique most of the time. Link just should have stopped and taught him how to build a dang sign! Traversal of the massive grounds Link had to cover seemed swifter as well. Perhaps that was due to better layout of warp points or Zonai devices.

The new abilities were so much fun. I missed Sheikah Slate bombs quite a bit, but that gave birth to new amazing strategies that were rewarding to develop and implement. Creating Zonai vehicles was also great. Seeing the brilliant creativity of folks online has been a true joy! It's amazing what's possible! This game is must-have fun. **– BRETT**



SIXTH OPINION
WARTS & WONDER

THE ZELDA FRANCHISE has been my all-time favorite series since . . . well, the NES era! But despite my adoration for it – and for Breath of the Wild, which is easily my favorite game of the last decade – I was just not feeling the pre-release excitement for Tears of the Kingdom at all. This was likely due to a combination of Nintendo's dreary trailers, the painfully slow trickle of new information and, most of all, its emphasis on revisiting a world I'd already poured 400 hours into.

As you probably have surmised, I'm happy to report that Tears of the Kingdom ended up becoming one of my favorite experiences on the Switch. First of all, this game is a miracle of programming. I daresay Satoru Iwata himself would be proud of what Nintendo pulled off here: an incredible network of physics engines and environmental effects that would be a bug-riddled mess in the hands of nearly any other developer. Secondly, it's absolutely massive with plenty to do, with the quests you undertake mostly feeding into each other smartly: Surface quests prepare you for longer treks in the Depths, Depths exploration helps you extend your batteries for air travel and Sky goodies prep you for the Surface and give maps for the Depths. Lastly, the story gets a shot in the arm thanks to an expertly handled plot point that's so captivating I can even overlook them backpedaling on it a bit by the end.

The game lacks some cohesion, just piling elements on top of Breath of the Wild's base without consideration of how its systems contributed to a thematically unified whole, like a frozen yogurt with every topping under the sun. The controls are perhaps Nintendo's messiest and most overly complex *ever*. And the reuse of Breath of the Wild's Hyrule, in my opinion, suffers from far more drawbacks than it does benefits, with too many areas being unchanged and/or stripped of what made them special in the first place.

And yet! Despite its problems, this world compelled me to scour its three layers to nigh-completion over the course of 150 hours. It did so through some fantastic new bosses like Colgera and Gleeok. It did so through breathless journeys on the backs of dragons and skydives half a mile off the ground. And it did so through my favorite new feature of the game: the terrifying Depths.

There was a moment fairly early in my adventure while I was skydiving down from a tower launch, where a shooting star happened to fall alongside Link. Nabbing it out of the sky while freefalling, I came to a realization that while Tears sometimes leans too heavily on what came before, it also can expertly recontextualize the previous game's sense of wonder and magic in a whole new way. Warts and all, every Switch owner owes it to themselves to try out this game! **– MATTHEW T.**

SEVENTH OPINION
ABILITIES & ADVENTURE

I HAVE NEVER played a game like this before. Maybe it's because I don't play Zelda (except for Link's Awakening). Maybe it's because I haven't explored big open worlds. Maybe because I didn't play Breath of the Wild – but if I ever do, I would say how much better Tears of the Kingdom is!

The abilities Ultrahand, Fuse, Ascend and Recall can be used in endless ways. Complex dungeon with multiple floors? Use Ascend for a try at skipping stuff! Flying bird platform launched before you could get on? Use Recall for a second chance! Can't beat a tough boss? Use Ultrahand to build a defensive wall! And with Fuse you can pull off high-damage attacks! Every item except the Master Sword has a Fuse attack power number. Lots of items are just 1, but by defeating enemies you'll get better items, and the tougher the enemy, the better the item. My Uncle Dan says with Fuse you can pull off 500-damage attacks!

I also liked the Depths as well as the Sky Islands. A typical Sky Island has a Zonai Dispenser and a Shrine that sets you on a quest to get a crystal on another nearby island. You can also find cool bosses called Flux Constructs up here. They can be found in the Depths too, but are easier to find in the clouds.

I liked all the other boss fights, too! Battle Talus is a walking rock with its weak spot and Bokoblins on top. A Gleeok will shoot you with fire, thunder or ice if you can't shoot its heads with arrows. Master Kohga builds a vehicle and uses it to oppose you!

I also like the dungeons/temples, because you get a new ally character for each one! My favorite is Tulin, because he can blow powerful wind gusts that can do lots of things, including giving boosts to your Paraglider!

The other allies are not are useful, but they're still interesting! Sidon wraps you in a water bubble so your next attack can be used to clear away toxic mud. Yunobo rolls up in a ball and launches forth to attack enemies or destroy rocks. Riju can add lightning strikes to your arrows, which is useful for beating Gibdos (but not much else). And you can fuse things to Mineru's arms for offense, or a fan or rocket to the back part of her robot body for traversal.

The main reason I wanted to play Tears of the Kingdom was because of Ultrahand and Fuse – I guess I didn't intend on doing much story stuff. But I ended up beating the four main dungeons and I'm around 3/4 of the way through the game! That was the answer to one of the quizzes from Carter's Corner last time. The other answer I mentioned earlier: I played Link's Awakening before this! But that one was totally different than this one. Any Zelda fan should play this! **– CARTER**

ARCHIVE

The complete list of Nintendo Force retail reviews from the last two years. Scores reflect individual reviewers' opinions.

SWITCH

TITLE	SCORE	REVIEWER	ISSUE
Ace Angler: Fishing Spirits	6.5	Rebecca	#63
Advance Wars 1+2: Re-Boot Camp	9.5	Lucas	#65
AI: The Somnium Files – nirvanA Initiative	8.0	Tony	#62
Alex Kidd in Miracle World DX	7.5	David	#54
Atari 50: The Anniversary Celebration	9.5	Kris	#64
Atelier Sophie 2: The Alchemist of the Mysterious Dream	8.0	Maggie	#59
Bayonetta 3	9.0	Jonathan	#63
Bayonetta Origins: Cereza and the Lost Demon	8.0	Jonathan	#65
Big Brain Academy: Brain vs. Brain	8.0	Kris	#58
Blue Reflection: Second Light	8.5	Maggie	#57
Bugsnax	8.5	Lucas	#61
Capcom Fighting Collection	9.0	Jonathan	#61
Cris Tales	6.5	Maggie	#57
Cruis'n Blast	8.0	David	#56
Digimon Survive	8.0	Maggie	#63
DNF Duel	8.0	Sean	#66
Doki Doki Literature Club Plus!	8.5	Rebecca	#55
Dragon Ball Z: Kakarot	6.0	Kris	#56
Dragon Quest Treasures	8.0	Matthew T.	#64
Fire Emblem Engage	8.5	Rebecca	#64
Fire Emblem Warriors: Three Hopes	8.0	Rebecca	#61
G.I. Joe: Operation Blackout	6.5	Lucas	#54
Harvestella	8.0	Nadia	#63
Hot Wheels Unleashed	7.5	Lucas	#56
JoJo's Bizarre Adventure: All-Star Battle R	6.5	Tony	#62
Kirby and the Forgotten Land	10	Lucas	#59
Kirby's Return to Dream Land Deluxe	9.0	Lucas	#65
LEGO Star Wars: The Skywalker Saga	9.0	Thor	#59
LIVE A LIVE	8.5	Rebecca	#61
Loop8: Summer of Gods	6.0	Maggie	#66
Mario + Rabbids Sparks of Hope	9.0	Lucas	#63
Mario Golf: Super Rush	9.0	Lucas	#54
Mario Party Superstars	8.5	Lucas	#57
Mario Strikers: Battle League	7.5	Lucas	#60
Mega Man Battle Network Legacy Collection	8.0	David	#65
Metroid Dread	9.0	Tony	#56
Metroid Prime Remastered	10	Lucas	#64
MLB The Show 22	8.5	Dan	#59
Monster Hunter Stories 2: Wings of Ruin	9.0	Maggie	#54
NEO: The World Ends with You	8.0	Rebecca	#55
NERF Legends	4.0	Lucas	#57
Ni no Kuni II: Revenant Kingdom – Prince's Edition	8.5	Brett	#56
Nickelodeon All-Star Brawl	7.5	Brett	#56
Nickelodeon Kart Racers 3: Slime Speedway	8.0	David	#63
No More Heroes III	9.5	Jonathan	#55
Octopath Traveler II	8.5	Rebecca	#65
Pac-Man Museum+	8.5	Kris	#60
Pac-Man World Re-Pac	7.5	Lucas	#62
Pokémon Brilliant Diamond	6.5	Rebecca	#57
Pokémon Legends: Arceus	9.0	Lucas	#58
Pokémon Scarlet	8.5	Lucas	#63
Pokémon Shining Pearl	6.0	Lucas	#57
Pokémon Violet	8.5	Lucas	#63
Rain on Your Parade	8.0	Lucas	#65
Record of Lodoss War: Deedlit in Wonder Labyrinth	8.0	Jonathan	#60
Rune Factory 5	7.5	Maggie	#59
Shadowverse: Champion's Battle	8.0	Maggie	#55
Shin Megami Tensei V	8.0	Meghan	#57
Sonic Colors: Ultimate	5.0	Kris	#58
Sonic Frontiers	7.0	Tony	#64
Splatoon 3	9.0	Lucas	#62
Super Monkey Ball: Banana Mania	8.5	David	#56
Taiko no Tatsujin: Rhythm Festival	8.0	J.-Charles	#63
Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles: Shredder's Revenge	10	Lucas	#60
Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles: The Cowabunga Collection	9.0	David	#62
The Caligula Effect 2	8.0	Maggie	#58
The Great Ace Attorney Chronicles	9.0	Rebecca	#54
The Legend of Heroes: Trails from Zero	9.0	Maggie	#62
The Legend of Heroes: Trails to Azure	10	Maggie	#65
The Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword HD	9.0	Lucas	#54
The Legend of Zelda: Tears of the Kingdom	10	Lucas	#66
Theatrhythm Final Bar Line	9.0	J.-Charles	#65
Transformers: Battlegrounds	7.5	Lucas	#54
Triangle Strategy	9.0	Nadia	#59
WarioWare: Get It Together!	7.5	Rebecca	#56
We Love Katamari REROLL + Royal Reverie	9.5	Jonathan	#66
World's End Club	6.5	Kris	#55
Wunderling DX	8.0	Lucas	#64
Xenoblade Chronicles 3	10	Maggie	#62
Ys IX: Monstrum Nox	9.0	Lucas	#55

SECOND OPINION
SONIC FRONTIERS

SONIC THE HEDGEHOG has been in a bit of a 3D rut for a while now. After the 3D Adventure-styled games of the early to mid-'00s, Sonic Team moved on to the "Boost" games, which were well received. Then they tried to shake up the formula in 2013's Sonic Lost World, which didn't stick the landing. People wanted Boost back. And Boost they got in 2017's Sonic Forces – only to realize that wasn't the answer they'd hoped for. So back into the kitchen the Team went, emerging last year with this *new* new formula.

Sonic Frontiers feels like a promising new start that's fresh, but hasn't shaken some of the vestiges of its past. It delivers to fans what they've been asking for (besides Boost): an open world Sonic game. Kinda. Oh, except it's not "open world," but "Open Zone." What's the difference? Well, Mario uses "worlds," while Sonic uses "Zones." That's more or less it.

Visually, Sonic Frontiers presents a very pretty world – er, Zone . . . that looks like just about every other pretty world in an open-world game. No checkered hills or striped grass or polygonal trees or any of that stuff. It isn't the first time Sonic has done without those hallmarks, but this might be one of the games that would have most benefited from them.

Stepping back further, the general concept feels very much like a more scaled-up Super Mario 64 or Sonic Adventure game, only the map/hub world (sorry, *Zone*), is where a whole lot of the action and MacGuffin-grabbing takes place. Scattered throughout the Starfall Islands are gates that lead to virtual recreations of previous Boost game levels, acting as "stages" that play a role in gathering the Chaos Emeralds so you can do chaotic-good stuff with them.

While Sonic feels more familiar in these areas, the Open Zone fields are another story entirely. I've been used to Sonic being a one- or two-button game for so long now that having a title that uses almost every single button on a modern controller can be a little jarring, especially if you've stepped away for a bit.

The longtime multimedia Sonic fan in me also appreciates how Frontiers finally treats its characters and lore with a bit more respect, thanks to my friend and catsitter, Ian Flynn. (There's your full disclosure.)

Overall, Sonic Frontiers is a good first step toward a new beginning for the Blue Blur. **– DAVID**

7.0 TONY

7.5 DAVID

VACATION EVALUATION

A Trip to the National Videogame Museum

Explore decades' worth of game industry history, all in one place!

FOR THE RECORD, "video game" is two separate words. You wouldn't write that you shuffled a deck to play a cardgame, or you sank a battleship while playing a boardgame, or you rolled a 20-sided die during a tabletoproleplayinggame. So why do some people insist on removing the space when writing video game? They're surely troubled individuals.

So it was against my better grammatical judgment that I recently took my two oldest sons to visit the National Videogame Museum in Frisco, Texas. But I'll respect their erroneously spaceless spelling for just this one page, in recognition of the excellence of the exhibits contained inside.

The National Videogame Museum first opened its doors in April 2016, and I've been meaning to make my way there ever since – it just isn't too often that I find myself anywhere near the state of Texas. But it's just as well that I waited, because here in 2023, Carter and Calvin were both old enough to fully appreciate it as well. I tapped into full "Back in My Day . . . " Mode and explained all the treasures on display as we walked through.

First to meet your eyes as you enter is the grand statue pictured above, and the epic display of every video game home console ever made behind it. An enormous SNES controller lets you choose a system and see more information about it. I thought it was done well – though they'll need to expand the system selection soon!

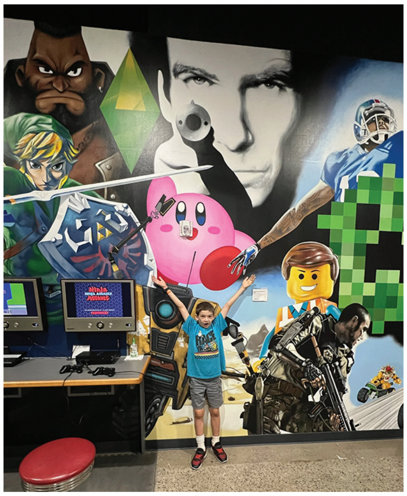
On the opposite wall of the entrance, a massive, playable game of Pong is set up, towering taller than any attendee! And that's just the first of many playable exhibits – the Museum lets you get your hands on everything from the oldest Ataris to the newest Nintendos, culminating in a full arcade with dozens of classic coin-op cabinets from the '80s and '90s. (You're given a handful of NVM coins as you enter to use on those machines, and you can always buy more if you're craving extra Dig Dug.)

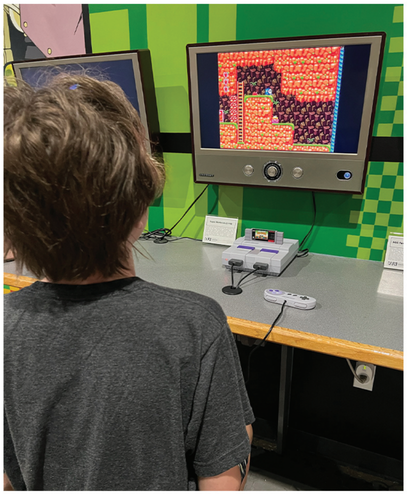
Carter, who loves all things Mario, got a kick out of playing an original NES and Super Mario Bros. in the Museum's replica of a typical '80s bedroom – and when he was done, Calvin took over and took on the original Duck Hunt, racking up a huge score! (Though it's pretty easy to do well in Duck Hunt with the Zapper pressed up directly against the TV.)

I most enjoyed seeing the oldest items in their curated collection, like Ralph Baer's original Brown Box – the system from the '60s that blazed the trail for all home game consoles – and the first prototype for the Power Glove! I got to see huge cases filled with Nintendo treasures that I'd only ever read about online, like obscure Game & Watch units from four decades ago, or Japan-exclusive products I'd otherwise have to fly to Kyoto to find.

It's hard to sum up an entire museum in a simple article like this, so I'll let more of my phone-snapped photos from the trip do the talking to sell you further on the idea of attending in person yourself! It's worth it if you've got the means to travel to Frisco. (And special thanks to my wife Mary for making our trip there possible!) **– LUCAS**

NVMusa.org

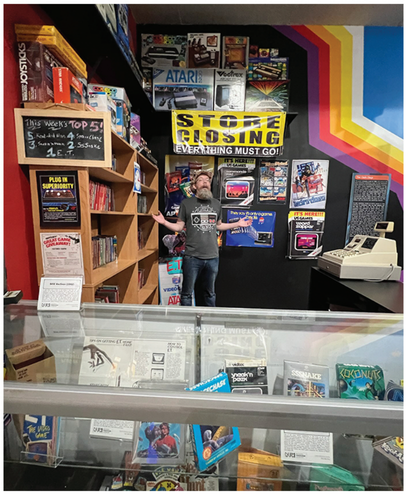


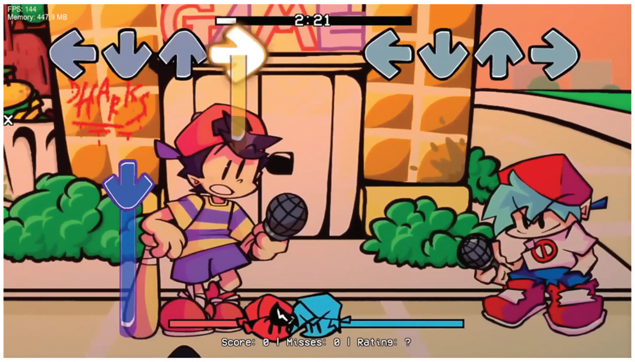


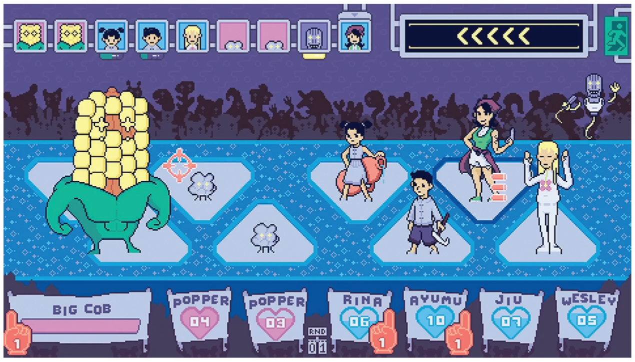
DAY AT THE MUSEUM

SOUVENIR SNAPSHOTS

Some quick captions, going clockwise starting in the upper left! **1)** Me and my favorite hat posing with an original Computer Space arcade machine! **2)** One of the Museum's massive murals. 9-year-old provided for scale. **3)** David Oxford will be jealous of this one: They're currently hosting a huge gallery of memorabilia from the making of the live-action Super Mario Bros. movie from 1993! **4)** The first-ever prototype for the Power Glove, displayed next to one of the final retail units. **5)** Carter enjoying a game of Super Mario Bros. on original hardware, while Calvin enjoys the ambience of an '80s era bedroom. (It was filled with all kinds of trinkets from that time period hiding in all those drawers.) **6)** They had this corner set up to look like a game store in the middle of the industry crash of the early '80s! **7)** Calvin discovers the optimal strategy for NES Duck Hunt, and **8)** Carter spending way too much time playing Mario games we have at home.







FAN-MADE VIDEO EVENT

More Mother

Thoughts on the fourth annual EarthBound community Direct!

SHOULD WE MAKE it official? I don't see any reason not to go ahead and declare it: The Mother fan community is the greatest fan community of all the fan communities. I've just decided that I'm authorized to decide that.

For the fourth year in a row, the most creatively minded, truly ambitious and genuinely gifted Mother and EarthBound fans on the planet have joined forces to present a new Mother Direct video event. It premiered on July 27, which was also the 34th anniversary of the Mother series as a whole. (The first game went on sale in Japan on July 29, 1989.) In prior years the Mother Direct went live closer to E3 time – June-ish each year – but the call was made to bump it back to the series' anniversary date, and I think that was a wise decision. (Though Mother's Day is right there in May every year. Could've been another option.)

But enough musings about the calendar! On to the content!

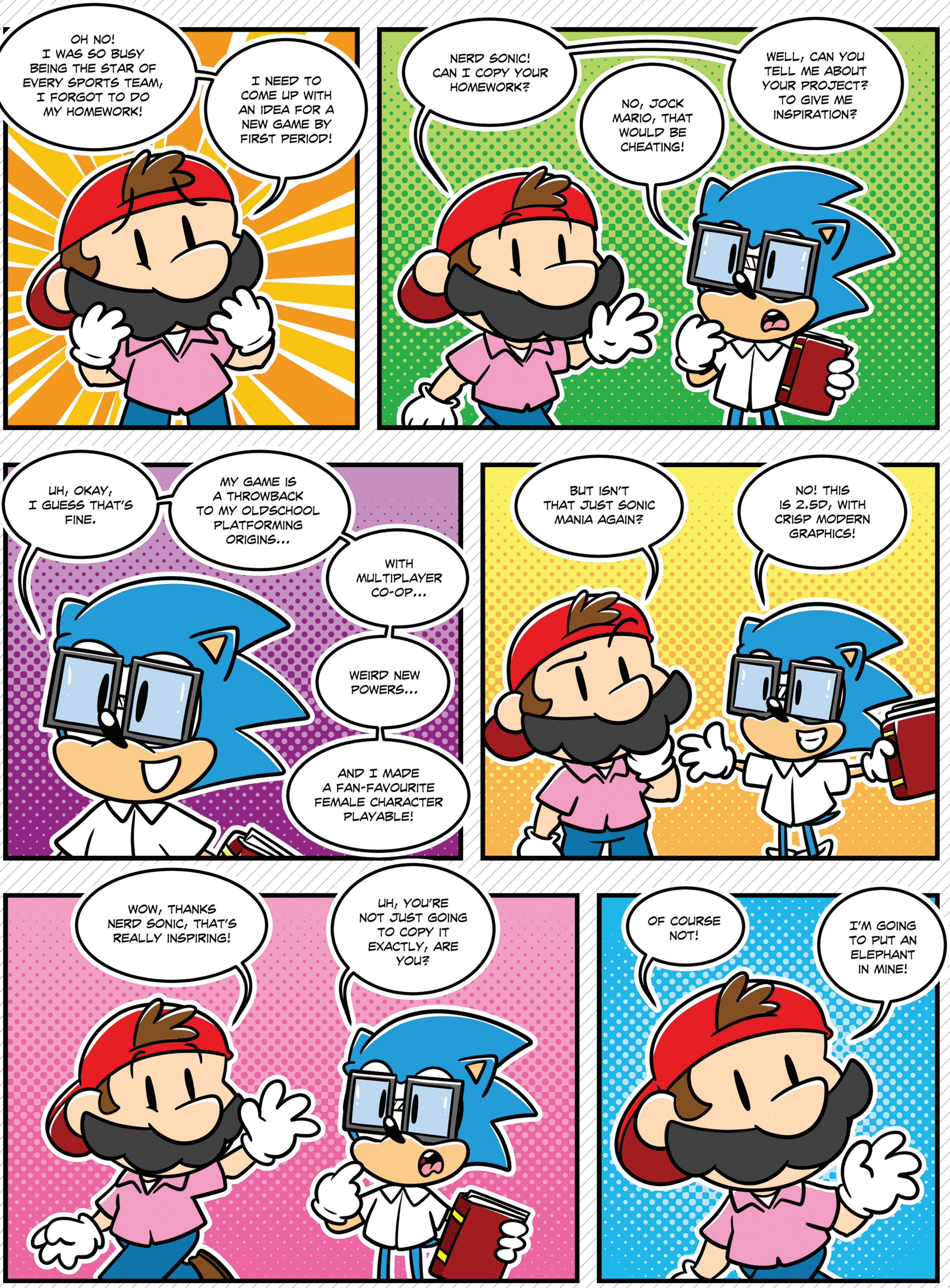
We once again got a mix of Mother/EarthBound fan projects – like ROM hacks and remakes of the core series games – along with original adventures that are inspired by the Ninten/Ness/Lucas trilogy in some meaningful way. You could call them "Motherlikes" if you want. The Direct does!

Catching my eye from that group of indie adventures were games like Nagayami Nights (pictured to the left; it's the one with the giant corn cob boss monster), Hypersomnia and Cairn: Mathair's Curse (which might be trying to sneak the word "Mother" into its subtitle a bit?). These indies all take some part of the EarthBound experience, like its battle system or its approach to over-world exploration, but then build whole new worlds on and around those borrowed elements. It's been fun to see Motherlikes become more established as an RPG subgenre in recent years.

The projects that just go ahead and use the Mother IP directly are always eye-catching too, of course, and some have made meaningful progress recently. Mother: Encore, which is a souped-up remake of the original 8-bit Mother game presented in more of a 16-bit style, debuted a new demo available for download in conjunction with the Direct (get it at MotherEncore.com), while Mother^2 (read that as "Mother Squared") is working to visually beef up the 16-bit SNES cult classic that so many of us know and love.

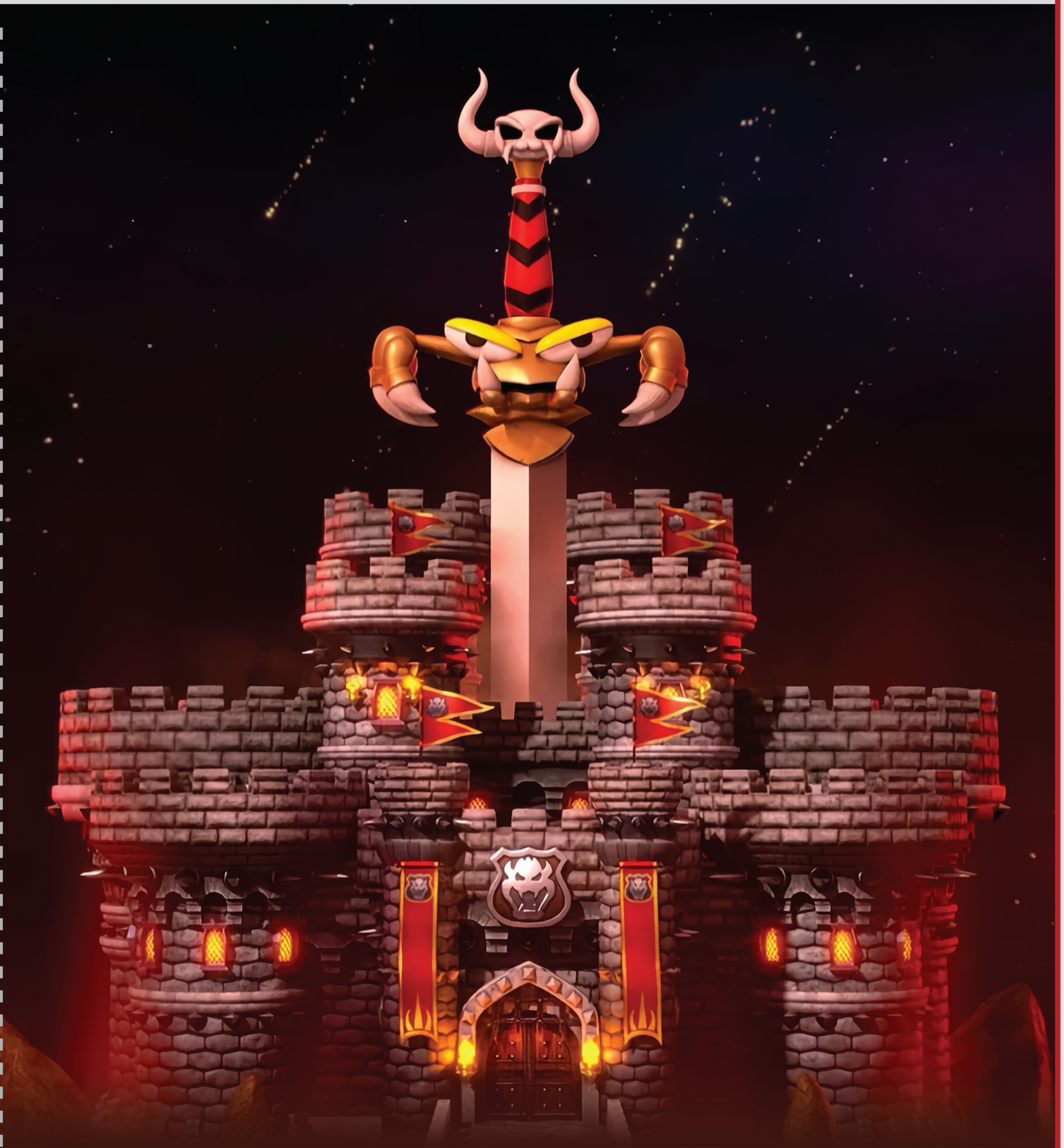
Maybe the most SMAAAASHING inclusions in the new Direct, though, weren't games at all, but rather projects that go beyond the video game medium! A new podcast superbly named "Mother, She Wrote" presents audio dramas retelling the stories of the games, then follows up with commentary about those same chapters, and coming up in November the team at Fangamer will be releasing "EarthBound USA," a new documentary telling the tale of the rise of this fan community. (It is the #1 fan community, you know!) **– LUCAS**

MotherForever.net



BY MATTHEW LOFFHAGEN

NEXT ISSUE



While Mario will soon return to his sidescrolling roots in **Super Mario Bros. Wonder**, he'll also be going isometric once more in the upcoming Switch remake of the SNES classic **Super Mario RPG**! We'll tilt our camera angle accordingly to remind all of you old-school gamers about the greatness of that adventure next time, as well as try our best to hype up an all-new generation to want to give it a try! (I mean, it starts with a giant, living sword stabbing itself into Bowser's Castle. What more could you want?)

We'll also keep the 2D platforming love rolling with a review of **Disney Illusion Island**, give you your Pokémon fix with evaluations of Part 1 of the **Scarlet & Violet** DLC and **Detective Pikachu Returns**, finally set sail in the long-awaited **Sea of Stars** and much more! Get excited, just like Exor up there clearly is!

IN THE WORKS FOR ISSUE #68:

SUPER MARIO **RPG**

SUPER MARIO BROS. **WONDER**

SONIC SUPERSTARS

LUIGI'S MANSION: DARK MOON COMES TO SWITCH!

SEA OF STARS

METROID PRIME 4

POKÉMON SCARLET & VIOLET: THE HIDDEN TREASURE OF AREA ZERO, PART 1: **THE TEAL MASK**

DETECTIVE PIKACHU **RETURNS**

DISNEY ILLUSION ISLAND

WARIOWARE: MOVE IT!

SUPER BOMBERMAN R 2

DRAGON QUEST MONSTERS: THE DARK PRINCE

RED DEAD REDEMPTION

AND MUCH **MORE!**

NOVEMBER/ DECEMBER 2023

GIVE SONIC A SHOT!

PLAYING A SONIC game was like taking a bite of forbidden fruit.

As the Genesis vs. SNES console wars of the early '90s raged, I was firmly entrenched in the loyal Nintendo army. I would defend the honor of Mario on every battlefield I stepped foot on! The gym at my school. The playground at my school. The *school library* at my school! If ever the appeal of playing Nintendo's video games was questioned, if ever an opinion was put forth that Sega's wares were in any way superior, you can bet I was there, arguing with all the might a skinny little glasses-wearing boy could muster. I was fully known and recognized by all as a true-blue Nintendo Kid.

. . . Which put me in an awkward spot when I had my first opportunity to actually play a Genesis. It was at a friend's house. Probably for a sleepover or something – I don't remember the details. I just remember walking into his living room and seeing it there: a Sega Genesis hooked up to his family TV, and already booted up and running Sonic the Hedgehog. Curiosity got the best of me, and I quickly cast my allegiance aside, picked up the oddly shaped, three-button controller and dashed my way through Green Hill Zone for the very first time.

And you know what? The world didn't end. It was even kind of fun! I didn't change my console preference after that experience, and maintained my Nintendo system loyalty thereafter, all the way through to adulthood. But I didn't give people a hard time any more if they expressed that their preference was for Sega's platforms. I could understand where they were coming from.

Decades later, there may not be many of you who've never given Sonic a shot before now – and I'm certain few of you are out there actively arguing against his appeal in public. But if you never have really played a Sonic the Hedgehog title, I do recommend you do so! One easy one to access right now is Sonic the Hedgehog 2, which is part of the Genesis lineup available to Nintendo Switch Online + Expansion Pack subscribers. Give it a try! I promise you, it's not forbidden. **– LUCAS**

(Sonic 2's probably the only one they'll add to NSO for "free." Beyond that, they want you to buy!)

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